make sense of me

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by athousandsilhouettes

Summary

A storm, a "time machine", and two people who are trying to stay as far away from each other as humanly possible. Until they're stuck in the past together. Whatever Warren expects when waking up on that particular school day, it's definitely not being sent back in time alongside Nathan Prescott. What could possibly go wrong?

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A Back to the Future-esque AU starring Warren and Nathan who get sent to Blackwell Academy back when their parents went to school. 1983, babyyyy! This ought to make the two close, at least physically to begin with. And surprise, surprise, Nathan's dad is still an asshole as a teenager.

Notes

Hellooooooo~
I'm back with more grahamscott content woooooo! This'll be a little bit more of a commitment since it will be multiple chapters, so bear with me. I promise I'll do my best! I'm aiming for around 6-8 chapters, though it may be a little longer depending on what I have planned out.

I don't know what my current craze with Back to the Future and associating it with these two characters is but I'm just rolling with it at this point. Hope you're digging it as much as I am!

I'm choosing not to apply any archive warnings BUT that being said: all ratings from the game apply to this fic. I may also change this as I update.

- Silhouettes

Chapter 1: departure

It started out like any other boring day. Well, kinda. Considering—yeah, Warren was stuck in English class listening to his teacher drone on about archetypes and their purpose in storytelling with his face propped up against his hand as he watched the minutes tick by, but —his favourite class happened to be next.

12:45. Just 15 more minutes. He can barely contain the anticipation that begins to build inside him when the clock eventually signals only five minutes left before he could hurry down the school halls to the science lab on the other side of the main building.

Sure, Warren's usually excited about what Ms. Grant has in store for them, but he was especially looking forward to being allotted time to work on their thesis projects. Being promised the use of their class time also meant that Warren was able to make plans with Max later that day to hit up a new coffee shop she'd been obsessing over. This repressed excitement seemed to make the minutes stretch out longer, with his attention span waning and his need to leave rising.

The shrill sound of the bell sounding all but shot Warren from his seat and sent him flying straight into the rapidly filling, narrow halls as students poured out from their classes. With hands that juggled the books he held and arms slung through his backpack straps haphazardly, he snaked his way through the mass of bodies.

Neon posters line the walls and lockers and basically *any* surface, really, that displays the next Vortex Club party happening next week. A stark contrast to the missing person posters of that girl. Rachel Amber. Taped up by the dozen and always leaving an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, making him look away.

Warren masterfully dodges the array of students crowding the halls but can't help his eyes from darting to the elaborate graphic design plastered all over the place. *Enter the Vortex Club: Struck by Lightning Party. It's Going to be Electric!*

Warren scoffs, disappointed to know that somehow those parties could be more obnoxious than previously thought. A stupid party themed after the surreal historical event of the founder's statue on campus being struck by lightning thirty years ago. *Right on its bald head.*

He hadn't realized just how distracting the posters are before he's colliding into someone. Nearly barreling the poor student over in his haste to class, he immediately begins profusely apologizing before he is able to focus on who exactly fell victim to their collision.

For any other circumstance, Warren might've thought a quick apology and admitting his mistake was enough for him to reconcile what had been done. But he is promptly corrected when his eyes zero in on the flash of a familiar red school varsity jacket and the deepening scowl he's met with as none other than Nathan *fucking* Prescott picks himself up and begins to tower over Warren–a feat Warren did not know he was capable of, seeing as the guy almost always had the posture of a shrimp. A really, really feral shrimp.

Immediately cutting off his sputtering “sorrys” and retracting the hand he held out in offer to help him off the ground, Warren instantly felt his throat tighten. *Fuck*.

“What the actual *fuck*, freak! I think you need to invest in some fucking glasses since–hey! Where the fuck do you think you’re going!”

With a strangled *oops!* Warren’s fight or flight instincts kick in and sends him fleeing the scene. Lucky for him, he’s now able to use the abundance of student bodies to dart his way between and miraculously lose Nathan within. He launches himself into the safety of the lab that—to Warren’s continued luck—Nathan doesn’t pursue him inside of. He figures the likes of someone like Nathan lost interest almost as soon as Warren was out of sight.

Breathing heavily, Warren takes a moment to compose himself whilst facing the door, half expecting Nathan to burst into the room anyways.

“You alright?”

“*Bahh!”* If his heart rate wasn’t already high enough, a voice that was *way* too close sounded behind him. He whips around in alarm for his vision to be filled with Brooke’s glasses-framed gaze looking over him. “Oh, hey Brooke.”

Taking a step back, he hefts a sigh of relief that turns into a breathy answer, “yeah, totally. Just eager to work on my project, can’t keep science waiting!” He internally cringes at how stupid that sounds, but instead of scrutinizing him like Warren thinks she might, Brooke’s eyes light up and her expression breaks into a smile.

“Glad to see someone else is taking this thesis project seriously. If you need any help with your contraption, don’t hesitate to ask. Mechanical science is my forte, after all.”

“Thanks for offering, I’ll definitely need to take you up on it.” Warren returns the smile, and with that, he gets to work on finding his project amidst the cluster of every other students' left on the designated table at the back of the class. No one else has arrived yet, so it takes him a solid minute to single out his own, spotting the square-shaped, silver reactor toward the back where he’d forgotten he’d put it the day prior.

Warren was working on constructing a time machine. A theoretical one, at least. He’d approached Ms. Grant about the idea early on, who was enthusiastic in her approval, saying *creativity has just as much impact on scientific achievement as fact.* Which was a nice way of saying that there was no way he could actually build a working time machine, but Warren only wanted an excuse to make something kinda fun and totally dorky… and totally not inspired by his favourite movie.

Wasting no time, he gets to work. Setting his reactor on the lab bench while scrounging through his backpack for his notebook to help him continue where he left off. More students trickle in and Ms. Grant starts to make her rounds to the individuals that have followed suit to work on their thesis projects.

“How are things going over here, Mr. Graham?” She leans over the lab countertop, an inquisitive look on her face as she eyes his invention.

“Great! I’ve been brainstorming what to use for lining the interior walls with the proper conductive material, seeing as this bad boy is going to be holding a lot of energy.” He scribbles down a last idea while explaining, his eyes downcast to his notes.

Ms. Grant gives a tentative *hmm*, “theoretically, that is.”

Warren finally looks up, smiling. “Yes. Theoretically.”

Though she looks skeptical, she gives him a nod and then points to a dial beside the LED screen at the center of his invention. “Is this here where you decide which year you’re jumping to?”

Warren nods, his smile turning into a wide grin, “exactly!”

With a pointed finger resting on her chin thoughtfully, Ms. Grant seems to be considering his work as if it were some real time machine that will shoot him whenever it is he desires. “So, what year is it you’re looking to go to?”

Warren scoffs, flipping on the battery-powered LED screen and turning the dial, “easy, 1983, of course.”

“Indeed.” Ms. Grant gives him a knowing look. She’s about to move on when a loud alarm breaks through the school speakers. It startles Warren enough to jump a little and reflexively cover a hand over his reactor.

Immediately jumping into action, Ms. Grant begins hustling students out of the door in a controlled fashion. Warren is the last to leave, too busy cramming his notebook and few tools into his bag and picking up his reactor to bring with him. *No way am I letting some fire ruin all my hard work.*

Passing by an unimpressed Ms. Grant, who holds the door open for him, Warren follows the rest of his classmates toward the doors leading to the main campus grounds outside. Most people congregate in front of the main school entrance and Warren gingerly places his time machine down on the patch of grass he settles on.

Turns out the whole thing was a false alarm as no fire was currently devastating Blackwell Academy. But Warren supposes he could have guessed that himself when thirty minutes pass and nothing happens. Principle Wells eventually announces that they’ve looked into things and all students are free from their classes for the remainder of the day.

He thinks to ask Max if she’s down to push up their plans when a sudden sense of unease overtakes him. Digging for his phone in his pocket, he brings it out to send her a quick text.

Warren:
You okay?

Max:
Yes, insane day tho.
Need to tell you all about it during coffee later.

Relief washes over Warren, glad to know Max got out even if it wasn't with the majority of people where he is.

Warren:
Good.
Can't wait to get together, they better have the best beans like you'd promised!
If you're unburdened for the rest of the day, we could go now?

Warren pockets his phone, excited about their plans. He then quickly remembers he'd meant to ask Max about returning the USB drive he'd let her borrow two weeks prior, retrieving his phone once again.

Warren:
Yo, mad max. Any chance you could also drop off my flash drive btw?
I need some info. And space.

For a moment he internally berates himself for firing so many texts her way when she'd clearly had a rough day, aware of his notoriety as a double texter. *Or quadruple texter.* But the thought promptly vanishes when she replies a minute later.

Max:
Hell yes! Where can I find you?

Warren:
I'll be in the parking lot.
Looking cool.
You'll see.

Damn his poor self-preservation and fast thumbs.

Max:
My camera will be ready.
See you shortly.

Worth it.

Making the short walk to the parking lot, Warren hastily closes in on his car to drop his project into the back seat. He securely straps it in with the seatbelt. He'd planned on taking it with him for the weekend to work on when he visits his parents anyways. God knows he could use his mom's help ironing out some of the mind-boggling details he's been hung up on. The woman is, to put it simply, a certified *genius.* He only wishes he'll grow up to be half as accomplished as her.

He pops his head out just in time to see Max descending the stairs into the lot and waves over at her. She returns her own timid wave and Warren proceeds to move around the front of his car, leaning against the hood as she walks up to him.

"Whatup, Max, how are you?"

Max holds out the flash drive for him, and Warren can't help but notice she seems a little shaken up. Her eyes looking at him but not focusing there, as if her mind is preoccupied by something else entirely. "Sorry for not returning it earlier."

"No problem. Hey, you sure you're okay?" He pats the spot next to him on the hood of his old, previously owned Chevy to invite her to sit. She accepts with a sigh, slinging her shoulder bag over to sit in her lap.

"Yeah. Kinda. I don't know, it's been one strange fucking day… Some pretty bizarro shit happened and I think I might–"

"*Max Caulfield*, right?" Whatever Max was going to say gets cut off by the sneer of someone saying her name. Both their heads whip up towards the person responsible and Warren can feel the colour drain from his face when he sees it's Nathan. Nathan Prescott. Again.

He comes straight toward where Max is sitting without slowing down in his stride. All swagger and hard determination written across his face as he stops to leer overtop of her with absolutely zero personal space. "You're one of Jefferson's photo groupies?"

"I could say the same about you." Max crosses her arms and Warren wonders how she has the ability to even say something like that to someone like *him* before he notices Nathan's now eyeing him, seemingly distracted enough to notice her comment.

"*You* again?"

Warren's frozen to the spot, unable to respond when Max intercepts the staring contest that's enacted between him and Nathan. "What do you *want*, Nathan?"

Nathan points his squinted expression back at her, "for you to stay out of my fucking business. I know you were in the bathroom. You better tell me what you saw, and if you ran to tell that bitch principal."

Bathroom? What's he talking about?

"Nothing but a butterfly." Innocently said, yet somehow all the more enraging to Nathan as his scowl deepens. Warren's all but confused at this point, looking back and forth between them as they fire off their words.

"You're full of shit. I'd respect you more if you told me the truth."

"I don't need your respect–"

"You're clueless. You have no idea who I am or what I can do."

"*Actually*, I have a pretty good idea of who you are…and what you can do," she mumbles the second half under her breath.

"Oh yeah? You think you know who I am? You think you got me *allll* figured out. Maybe you should worry about yourself."

Scared of what might transpire, Warren interrupts their dispute by raising a hand to Nathan's shoulder, who immediately flinches away from the touch. "Hey, dude, back off. She's no threat to you."

"Oh? And I suppose you think you are? You little punk bitch." Warren doesn't have any time to react before Nathan butts his forehead into Warren's nose. Pain immediately explodes along his bridge and he can feel the warm sensation of what he knows is blood begin to seep down over his lips.

Everything after that happens fast. Warren hits the asphalt before he's even aware that he'd fallen. His elbows take the grunt of it, adding to the pain he's already in. He hears Max yell something but can't make out what she's saying when Nathan wastes no time grabbing at her throat.

"*Nobody* tells me what to do! Not my parents, not the principal, not that whore in the bathroom!"

Much to his body's protest, Warren scrambles off of his back just as Max digs her nails into the side of Nathan's face. He stumbles away from her with a grunt, hands flying up to cover where she'd scratched him. And that's when Warren hears the piercing sound of tires against concrete ring throughout the lot, craning his neck in time to see an old beat-up pickup truck turn in their direction at full speed.

He braces his hands over his face, but the truck comes to a screeching halt right where Max had fallen when trying to get away from Nathan. She uses the truck as leverage to get back on her feet, momentarily making eye contact with the driver before completely freezing.

"Max?"

"*Chloe!?"*

Their exchange is brief when Nathan stands back up and reflects the shocked look they all share, "not this bitch again." He raises his hand in disbelief to point at the blue-haired girl—definitely not who Warren was expecting to be driving—behind the wheel and starts to stride towards the truck.

Warren's now back on his feet and launching himself like a battering ram towards Nathan, wrapping his arms around his form to take him down and, hopefully, giving Max a chance to get the hell out of there. Especially considering she apparently knows this other girl. "Go, go! I got this–"

A fist meeting his jaw instantly cuts him off and Nathan's now over top of him and sending punch after punch to his face. He squeezes his eyes shut but hears the truck engine rev, then feels the weight of Nathan shift off of him. Warren peaks an already swelling eye open and sees Nathan flinging a frustrated kick to the truck door after Max has already climbed inside.

"Get your punk asses out of there now! Don't even try to run! Nobody messes with me!" He decks the door for extra measure and Warren can't help but think that *no shit* they're not

going to get out now, even if there was some slight chance that they might've in the first place.

The truck is thrown forwards and it sends Nathan off balance, but it doesn't deter him in trying to chase after them. But soon they're gone, and all that's left is the dust behind them. Warren thinks maybe it's all over. Only when Nathan turns his enraged and slightly feral expression back to Warren, does he come to terms with how very wrong he is.

He's trudging back Warren's way with fire in his eyes, motivating Warren to rush to his feet and use his car as a barricade between himself and Nathan. He circles the car and Nathan stomps right up to it, slamming his palms against the hood. "Can't get away from me, *bitch*. Nowhere to go." Nathan starts moving counterclockwise forcing Warren to do the same until they're once again on opposite sides of the vehicle, but instead of trunk to hood, they are now door to door.

Warren thinks about making a run for the school, since he's closer to the parking lot exit. Or maneuvering a speedy escape into his car and quickly locking it behind him. All internal devising goes out the window, though, when Nathan drops his gaze to something in the back of the car near the seat he's closest to and Warren's heart drops. He's not fast enough to lock the car that he'd stupidly left open from earlier before Nathan's pulling at the handle and yanking out his thesis project.

He then hauls it to the open space of the parking lot with the same determination Warren had seen when he stormed up to Max and him only minutes earlier. Warren runs to meet him there and pleads for Nathan to stop whatever he's planning to do. "No, Nathan! Nonononono*no–"*

The smashing sound of his reactor hitting the ground echoes in the tiny lot and makes Warren flinch. He's on his knees next to it immediately, not caring that Nathan's still towering above. He picks at the pieces mournfully, too busy to notice how Nathan stands completely still beside him.

When he does look up, Nathan's staring at what's left of Warren's project in his hands. His face is twisted in disgust, which Warren finds a little odd, but it could have easily been twisted in hatred. Warren doesn't get to ponder over it, nor does he feel inclined to, as Nathan proceeds to turn away sharply and walk off without another word. Shoulders hunched, fists clenched at either side, and looking as though he has a stick up his ass.

Then Warren's alone, with nothing but his hard work and dedication left devastatingly crushed in the palms of his hands.

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"Nah, it's fine. It's not every day you bump into your childhood best friend who also just happened to save your life."

There's a delayed laugh from Max over the speaker of Warren's phone—sticking out of his car cup holder—that almost sounds sarcastic. "Yeah, pretty much." her voice softens slightly, "thanks for understanding, Warren. We'll go for coffee soon, I promise. And thanks again for stepping in. Are you sure you're not too badly hurt? You should see the school nurse–"

"I'm fine, don't worry. My nose stopped bleeding, so that must be a good sign." he casts a pitiful look at the pieces of his reactor that have been promoted to sit in his passenger seat for the time being. "Wish I could say the same for my thesis… Nathan really did a number on it. *God*, that guy sucks. I wish he would've just beat *me* up more instead."

"Don't say that… I feel bad about what happened back there."

"Don't feel bad–"

Max cuts him off before he can continue, "I feel bad for you, *and* for Nathan."

"Hold up–you *do?* "

"There's clearly something wrong with Nathan, and he needs help. But I wasn't making the situation any better by egging him on like that…" For as long as Warren has known her, Max has always had the ability to speak in a manner that's cool and collected, even in what she considers *'egging Nathan on'*. It's a characteristic of hers Warren appreciates but doesn't think he can ever fully comprehend. Even now her tone is reasonable and Warren can't help but be indignant about the entire ordeal.

"Max, the dude's *crazy*, I don't think it mattered what you would have said."

"That's not fair, Warren. I mean it when I say he needs help. I…he's capable of some pretty scary shit. I'm not asking you to forgive him and be his friend or anything… I don't know, maybe just try avoiding him for a while."

"Good, cause I am *not* about to become besties with Nathan Prescott."

She doesn't respond to that, opting to change the subject instead, "so what're you up to now?"

Warren sighs, gripping the steering wheel with one hand while lightly pressing his fingers to his nose to check if it really *had* stopped bleeding. "I was thinking of hitting up Two Whales to work but… think I'll still go to that coffee shop anyways. Take some time to try and undo some of this damage. Don't get me wrong, Joyce knows how to make a mean cup of joe, but I could do with a change of scenery and some fancy, sugary coffee seeing as I'll likely be staying up all night."

An empathetic hum sounds from his phone, "Good luck, then. I'm sure you'll be able to fix it. If it makes you feel any better, my camera got smashed in the whole process, too."

Warren feels a tinge of guilt. That camera was Max's most prized possession and she wasn't bitching about it like a little…well, *bitch*. "Ah, Max I'm so sorry. Of course that doesn't

make me feel better." *If anything it just makes me want to punch Nathan's teeth in even more.* He doesn't voice that thought, though.

"It's okay. I gotta go, but keep me updated with the progress, okay?"

"Will do. Catch you later, Max."

The low beep from his phone signals the call ending, and he breathes out another long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He flips through the car buttons to put on a CD, hoping to let off some steam before making it to the coffee shop. It's an old one, but also a favourite tune of his. Spending the majority of the car ride listening to *Wishing (If I Had a Photograph of You)* by *A Flock of Seagulls* before he finally pulls into the small plaza of the coffee shop.

The space is small, modest, and cozy. A variety of different pieces of art line the orange brick walls with elaborate frames. Black painted, low-hanging lamps contrast the colours nicely. And somehow it's exactly what Warren pictured Max choosing for a coffee shop. He picks out a secluded booth in the corner to settle and hopefully avoid unwarranted attention from not only the contraption in his hands but his appearance. He'd managed to clean himself up a little before leaving, at least, so he doesn't think he'll draw too many eyes.

Warren gets to work on salvaging his reactor, after deducing just how bad the damage actually is. Turns out, it's not as disastrous as he originally thought. The top door had broken off its hinges and the dial knob popped off, but those were easy fixes. Warren's more concerned over the rattling he heard inside, but upon further inspection, it's mostly some of the internal wires that managed to get loose.

Taking out the necessities to get the job done—including his notebook, a pen, some tools, and his headphones—from the backpack he plopped down next to him, Warren makes a short 'to do' list before leaving his table and ordering himself a drink. He asks for a cinnamon dolce latte, because *hell yeah*, and it arrives not long after he gets started. Thanking the barista, he takes a sip and is immediately hooked. *Max wasn't kidding, this stuff's good.* Though, he realizes a syruped-up latte probably isn't the best deciding factor to how good their beans truly are.

So when Warren downs the latte after only getting through one thing on the list, he goes back to the counter to order a 'Honey Almond' flat white. He's intrigued, to say the least. Sipping away at it while working through the remainder of the list, he orders another one in the process and before he knows it, he has a somewhat recovered version of his reactor.

On a caffeine and sugar-driven roll, he decides to take it one step further and insulate the interior wall with the material he'd managed to snag back at the school lab and theorized could work. When he's finished using his tiny screwdriver to firmly hold each panel in place, he sits back in his seat to admire his work.

The last of his coffee has gone cold, but he downs it anyway. And when the same barista that had given him his drink comes over to his table, Warren pulls out his earbuds and holds up the saucer and cup for them to take with a smile.

“Thank you.” The barista takes it from him. She returns the smile, which falters slightly as she continues to stand there. “Are you, uh, thinking of staying for much longer or…?”

Panic seizes Warren for a split second as he glances down at his watch for the time, reading 9:07. “I’m so sorry, are you guys closed!?” He *swore* he thought he’d read that they closed at 10, not even realizing how long it’s been since coming in the first place, either.

“No, but we were thinking of closing up early because of the storm.”

“The storm?” Even though Warren had been listening to his music while working, he doesn't know how he managed not to notice the storm that had started up just outside his window. Only now did he tune into the prominent sound of rain beating against the glass, swivelling his head to see the monstrosity that brewed there.

“They say it’s going to get worse, be careful if you have to drive far.” The barista draws her eyebrows together in worry as she follows Warren’s gaze out the window.

Crap. I could've avoided this.

“I’m so sorry for keeping you,” He’s already packing his things away, standing up to put his backpack on. “I should really get going then, thanks for the warning. And the amazing coffee,” he adds with a sheepish grin.

He carefully picks up his still delicate reactor, and thanks the barista again. She tells him to ‘stay safe’ with an expression that hadn’t changed from worried the whole exchange and in turn Warren says he will. But after stepping foot outside, he’s met with such a strong gust of wind it threatens to take the reactor straight out of his hands to be thrown to the ground once more. He grips it tightly to his chest and struggles his way to his car, not at all prepared for the rain that drenches him, having sacrificed his hoodie to cover the reactor.

So, dripping wet in only a t-shirt, Warren clambers into the safety of his car–only after securely placing his reactor inside, of course. It’s then that he gets his first proper look at the storm around him. It's dark out now, which somehow adds to the ominous characteristic the storm has taken on. The wind whips the rain in every direction, which comes down in sheets and slams irregularly against his windshield.

Warren turns his key in the ignition to start the engine, then pulls out of the parking lot to make his way back to the academy. He flips on the radio in case there’s any update on how bad the storm is getting. Though, he can see it for himself. Trees that sway in the wind turn into stop signs that wobble. Visibility grows worse, even when he’s driving a stable 25 miles per hour down the main road back towards school.

Thunder shakes his car and lightning follows soon after, some of the flashes too close for comfort. He tells himself it’s fine and knows it’s not much longer until he’s back. Then all he has to do is… *book it across the parking lot and main campus, down the stairs and stretch of path that leads to the dorms… shit.*

Maybe he’ll wait it out once he’s in the parking lot. Besides, it’s been said that one of the safest places to be during a thunderstorm is in your car. *Unless a tree falls down on top of*

you. He decides to cross that bridge when he gets there, focusing on simply getting as far as the parking lot to begin with.

With the school in sight, Warren's shoulders ease slightly from the tense, hunched state they'd contracted in for the entire ride back. The roads have become eerily quiet, making him that much happier to be back at Blackwell. At least no one else was crazy enough to be out in the storm. Warren hopes.

He doesn't realize just how wrong he is until pulling into the dark lot. With his vision still blurred by the rain, Warren almost misses the warped figure that appears in front of his car. His headlights catch a flash of red amongst the downpour and he slams his foot on the break at the exact same time the sound of something equivalent to an explosion breaks the air.

The sky momentarily lights up so bright that Warren has to squeeze his eyes shut and he swears he can hear the *thud* of something heavy against his car. The rumble of thunder morphs into a mechanical whirring somewhere behind him, followed by the distant smell of burning. Overwhelmed in practically every aspect, Warren is apprehensive to open his eyes.

When he finally does, he isn't at all prepared for the sight he's met with.

Chapter 2: a hole in the earth

Chapter Summary

In which we see it all again. But from Nathan's point of view.

Chapter Notes

This chapter turned out a little darker than I originally anticipated, but I promise It won't stay like this! The reason for it being a little more serious than usual (and contrast of what I plan for the rest of the fic consisting of) is most likely because it's from Nathan's POV at the beginning of the game, where I think he is particularly self-destructive.

Before I get into it, I should preface this chapter with a couple of trigger warnings; there is mention of anxiety, panic attacks/panic triggers and depression/suicidal thoughts. This is a pretty low point of Nathan's life and it will get better from here.

Other than that, please enjoy this (disaster of a) chapter that is pretty much a retelling of the first chap but from Nathan's POV! This should be the only time where things are repeated story-wise as the following chapters will be linear (as linear as time travel can be, I suppose haha).

I might try to stick to Warren's POV more than Nathan's for the remainder of the story, but if you guys like Nathan's POV too then maybe I will even it out! Please let me know what you think ^_^

Sorry for the long note, now without further ado…

Another shitty day. Nathan focuses on the analog clock of his truck. 12:45. A bright green imprint of the digital numbers on the back of his eyelids tell him he's been staring too intently at it again. Too focused on the passing of every individual minute that goes by impossibly slow. With growing impatience, he tells himself to wait five more minutes before leaving, his leg bouncing the whole while.

He doesn't even last that long. Only being able to stand another three minutes before he hastily exits his pickup and slams the car door behind him. He slams it a little too hard and the sound bounces across the small space of the school parking lot. He knows he's irritable, more so than usual, and doesn't know if being aware of the fact is somehow better or only adds to it.

Clenching his teeth, he instinctively mirrors the movement by tightening his grip around the gun he holds in his jacket pocket. He dares not remove his hand, keeping it stuffed deep down as he makes his way across campus. In turn, the vibration of his phone in the adjacent pocket signalling that he received a text sends him jumping.

Fucking ease up, he tells himself, cursing under his breath as he pulls his phone out. A message from Victoria reads across the screen, which he promptly ignores when shoving his phone away again.

Making it to the stairs that go up to the main building, he pushes his way inside and is immediately met with what seems like the entire school body as they're let out of their classes. He tries to avoid looking directly at anyone, averting his attention to the multitude of posters lining the walls instead. It's a mistake, he realizes, as he locks his eyes with those of Rachel Amber. Or, at least the lifeless, black and white version of them. Her face plastered over and over like a stamp above lockers and pinned to bulletin boards.

Shame bleeds into his limbs, making them heavy and causing his already clammy hands to sweat harder. He drops his head and in doing so avoids noticing the haste of someone speeding toward him as he crosses the hall.

The impact is hard, knocking Nathan to the floor. It takes all his willpower not to whip out the gun he grips in reflex from the sudden physical impact. He refrains, luckily, sparing him to be witnessed waving a weapon around by basically the entirety of Blackwell Academy.

Scrambling up off the floor, he stares down the kid who was stupid enough to not look where they were going, "what the actual *fuck*, freak!" He's met with the blown out stare of some dark brown mop-headed kid who Nathan swears is petrified in place. "I think you need to invest in some glasses since–hey! Where the fuck do you think you're going!" He's cut off when the guy snaps out of his frozen state and suddenly launches himself down the hallway past Nathan. He calls after him but doesn't follow, seeing as he has no time to chase him down anyways, muttering under his breath as he turns back in the direction of the girl's bathroom, "whatthefuck*ever."*

It's safe to say that Nathan's heart rate has significantly increased after the encounter in the hallway, and it does nothing to ease his already racing mind when he swings aside the bathroom door to begin pacing the dirty, tiled floor. He hadn't allowed himself to think much about the meeting that was going to take place here, and perhaps it's that repression that makes it harder to breathe right in that moment and his chest feel like it's being squeezed.

"It's cool, Nathan… Don't stress… You're okay… Just count to three…" He runs the back of his hand against his temple which is now damp with sweat. "Don't be scared… You *own* this school… If I wanted, I could blow it up…" The statement makes him flinch, seeing its reflection in one of the mirrors he'd planted himself in front of, aware of how it screws up his face. He doesn't mean that. He *knows* he doesn't mean that but still lets himself voice stupid shit because it's all he knows how to do.

It's all he can do to stop this hatred that spreads inside him–the little bit of rebellion against his father, his family–his teachers, *everybody* around him who think they know him, think he's fucked up–and they're right but don't know to what *extent*–that he's fucked up, yes, but

to a level they *could never even comprehend*–and it eats away at him–where he turns it inside himself to push back out with cruel words and intentions because he's scared that if he doesn't that cruelty and hate will be self-inflicted–swallowing him whole–choking on it–*realizing* it–realizing that it's because he hates himself–*despises* himself–wishes he was dead. *In a hole in the earth.*

It creeps slowly through to his bones, that feeling of numbness that turns his blood cold and prickles the tips of his fingers.

The bathroom door bursts open, jolting Nathan from the blinding panic that momentarily seizes him. He's gripping the sink so hard his knuckles are paper white and he snaps his head up to see that blue-haired girl, Chloe–Chloe Price, in the reflection of the mirror. She struts in, leisurely pushing open each stall. Her shrill voice fills the air, going on about something that Nathan can't focus on, too busy concentrating on his struggle to breathe.

Breathe in…

One.

Breathe out…

Two.

Breathe in…

Three.

"So what do you want?" he exhales the words out, hardening his gaze at her through the mirror. She narrows her eyes in return but there's a ghost of a smirk on her lips. She's enjoying this.

"Let's talk bidness–"

"I've got nothing for you."

"Wrong, you've got hella cash."

Hella. He immediately thinks of Rachel. His gaze drops back down to his fingers, curled tightly around the lip of the porcelain sink. "That's my family," he hisses between clenched teeth. "Not me."

"Oh boo hoo, poor little *rich kid."* She emphasizes the last words, which grind into Nathan. "I know you've been pumpin' drugs n' shit to kids around here." She comes up right beside Nathan then, their faces mere inches apart while his attention is still downcast. "I bet your respectable family would help me out if I went to them. Man, I can see the headlines now–"

"Leave. Them. Out of this, bitch!" He grips the sink so hard it hurts, wishing she would stop talking. To shut up, *shut up shut up shut up.*

“I can tell everybody that Nathan Prescott is a punk ass who begs like a little girl and talks to himself–” she shoves him, making him lose his grip. And he’s had enough. Nathan reels on her, shoving her back and yanking out the gun in his pocket to aim right at her.

Her expression immediately shifts, dropping any ounce of courage she previously wielded at the sight of a gun in her face. *That’s right.* “You don’t know who the fuck I am or who you’re messing around with!” His voice shakes and so do his hands, which he tries and fails to keep steady.

Backing up against the wall, she tentatively raises her hands in defence, “Where’d you get that? What’re you doing? Come on, put that thing down!” But he doesn’t, pressing it into her side instead. Half to aid his shaking hand and half to revel in the way her eyes flash with fear.

“Don’t *ever* tell me what to do. I’m so *sick* of people trying to control me!” *Like everyone. Like everyone in his life.*

“You are going to get in hella more trouble for this than drugs–”

He doesn’t care, barely even listening to her anymore as he cuts her off, “Nobody would ever even miss your *‘punk ass’*, would they?” *Nobody. Nobody would miss him.*

“Get that gun away from me, psycho!”

The sound of glass shattering pierces the air, and for a split second Nathan wonders if that’s what it feels like to take a life. But he realizes soon that the sound had been real, that he’d never pulled the trigger, because the next thing he feels is the sensation of palms hard against his chest to push him away. And he’s falling to the ground for the second time that day.

He lies there for a couple of seconds, sprawled out and wondering if he can ever get lower than this. The entrance to the washroom has long since slammed behind Chloe, replaced by the blaring of a fire alarm. But it’s all white noise to him, his thoughts just as rhythmic. Just as loud.

I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do this anymore.

-

Nathan’s back at his dorm, pacing the small space of the room after booking it out of school and across campus. He’d immediately hid the gun away, desperate for some distance between it and him. He doesn’t want to think about whether he would have killed that girl. He doesn’t want to think about it but he does. Then he thinks of Rachel. And with the following step of his stride, he swivels to drop beside his trash can and proceeds to empty his guts out.

-

He’s calmed down a bit, spread out on the floor of his room–his racing thoughts drowned out by Low Roar’s *Vampire on My Fridge* that plays through his earbuds. Letting the music heal him in that moment, if only slightly. It's enough to ease his breathing, growing steadier than before. He yanks the cord free from his ears as he sits up, sliding to sit with his back against the foot of his bed.

Running a still shaky hand through his now unkempt hair, he takes the time to mull over the interaction in the bathroom and comes to the conclusion that someone pulled that fire alarm on purpose. And that someone had been in the bathroom with them.

So he goes back.

He retraces his steps once he’s inside the bathroom again and finds exactly what he’s looking for. There’s a polaroid ripped in two, its white-bordered pieces lay starkly contrasted on the gritty tiled floor. Nathan doesn’t know how he could’ve missed it in the first place. And when he picks them up to examine the photo as a whole he already knows who it belonged to before the halves touch. There’s only one student who uses Polaroid film in Blackwell, after all.

The image of a girl with short brown hair and her back to the camera centers the photo, confirming Nathan’s thoughts on who it is. *Max Caulfield.* He lets the pieces fall from his grasp, which flutter back to the floor.

The bathroom door swings aside upon his exit before the remnants of the photo even land and Nathan’s pulling his phone out to call Victoria. He falters when he’s faced with his unlocked home screen, though.

Victoria could most likely aid him with finding Max, but he knows she would be full of questions that Nathan didn’t want to answer. Couldn’t answer. So he continues staring aimlessly at his phone, lost for any sort of direction to take. *I need a fucking cigarette.*

Patting down his jacket and pant pockets, Nathan curses under his breath when he doesn’t feel the small carton anywhere on him. *Shit.* They’re in his truck. Left behind by his scramble-brained past self in his anticipation for the meeting in the bathroom. He’s making his way out of the main building and towards the parking lot before he knows it, craving the nicotine and need to keep his hands preoccupied and telling himself he’ll look for Max after.

Turns out he doesn’t need to look very far, as he descends the short set of stairs into the lot to see the very girl talking with someone not even 10 feet from his truck. Her short cropped hair is distinguishable even from this distance–as well as her poor choice of fashion–with her back towards Nathan in a way reminiscent of the photograph he’d found in the bathroom before she moves to sit on the car beside her friend.

He picks up his pace, making a beeline towards her and calls out her name, “*Max Caulfield,* right?”

The situation escalates—because that's what Nathan's good at. And what starts out as a heated conversation quickly turns physical.

His confrontation is interrupted when Chloe—of all people—pulls up in her truck to intercept the whole thing. And before he can react, he's tackled to the ground by the person Max had been talking to. The same guy that Nathan ran into earlier that day–Warren…Graham. Yes, that's who's now taking punch after punch against the asphalt of the parking lot and whose sticky blood begins to coat Nathan's fist, seeing the trickle of red run from the kid's nose.

There's muted yelling around him and the rev of an engine that makes Nathan jump back to his feet. He's throwing punches and kicks towards the truck Max has escaped inside of, yelling for them to '*get their punk asses out of there'* to little avail. They have the advantage, driving away and forcing Nathan to displace his anger somewhere else, anywhere else that he can.

Nathan whips back around to see a petrified Warren staring at him after having heaved himself off the ground. There's a split second where they're both frozen, which is broken when Warren turns tail to hide behind some old, banged-up car. Nathan follows and the two end up going in circles. Nathan's frustration builds, coming to an abrupt stop at the side of the car. *This little piece of shit.*

Eyes darting around, Nathan looks for some sort of leverage, coming to the realization that the car currently being used as a barricade between them had to be Warren's. He knows this when his gaze lands on the most nerdy piece of junk he's ever seen strapped in the back seat at the window Nathan stands beside.

He sees red. And then he's consumed by it.

Before he can fully comprehend what he's doing, Nathan has hold of Warren's science project and is hurrying away with it towards the open space of the lot. He blinks and it's on the ground, pieces having smashed off of it to scatter around the point of impact. He hadn't comprehended the weight of it leaving his hands, or the sound of it hitting the concrete before it's over.

Too far. He'd taken it too far.

Did he though? Was destroying some punk's science project really that bad compared to beating the shit out of him a moment earlier? Or pulling a gun on some defenceless girl in the bathroom? But they were different, those actions were met with despised looks thrown his way. Hatred. Hatred he could deal with, but this–the look of utter devastation on Warren's face and the silence that follows is something Nathan doesn't know what to do with, wishing for a hole to form in the ground beneath his feet and swallow him whole.

That will never happen, though. Not when he himself is the source of all of this. A blackhole that destroys everything around him. Taking and taking and taking and taking.

-

The icy sting of cold water against his knuckles makes Nathan flinch, but he forces himself to hold his hands under the harsh stream anyways. He's back at the dormitories after his failed attempt at intimidation. Or maybe he didn't fail, maybe now Max and Chloe and *whoeverthefuck*else will stay out of his business for good.

He pulls back from the sink, turning the tap off and grabbing at the paper towel dispenser. It feels like sandpaper against his skin. Then his hands are back on the sink to hold him upright and he's finally forced to look at his reflection.

The person that stares back at him has become unrecognizable over the course of the last few months, it almost takes him a second to know it's his own eyes that take in the form before him. They're sunken in with deep, dark circles beneath that reflect the little sleep he's been getting. Their usual stark blue look gray in this lighting, desaturated even next to his pale skin. And his hair, which he'd stopped styling some time ago, is dishevelled with pieces sticking out from him running his hands through it so often. Then there's the newly gained scratch marks along his cheek, to which he reaches his fingers up to gently prod at. It stings, but it's nothing compared to how agitated he feels. The marks are red and angry, just like him.

So. He pretty much looks like how he feels.

The vibration that starts in his pocket doesn't make him jump this time, but a slow building dread spreads across his chest nonetheless. He reaches an increasingly shaking hand to grab his phone there, pulling it out to see the anonymous picture of an unknown caller. The feeling of unease in his gut deepens. He knows exactly who it is. He places it on the porcelain counter and takes a step back, combing his shaky fingers through his hair.

The ringing stops, and Nathan only gets about 30 seconds of peace before it starts back up again. In a fit of rage, Nathan grabs the phone off of the countertop and throws it across the room. *"I don't want to talk to you!"*

He's clenching his fists so tight that his fingernails dig into the palms of his hands, which he doesn't notice until he unclenches them to see the little crescent marks dotted there, the slight sting that comes with them secondary.

For the third time, his phone rings. The vibration causes it to clatter against the grimey tiles. Nathan thinks he might rip his hair out, and considers sending a swift kick to the device to stop it from ringing for good until he sees Victoria's picture through the newly acquired cracks on the screen.

There is the slightest bit of relief at seeing her call, but it's fleeting. He takes a deep breath before picking it up off the floor and sliding his thumb across to answer. "You haven't been answering my texts." Her tone is curt, but hurt lies there, too. Nathan knows she means well, yet it still rubs him the wrong way.

"I've been busy!" He immediately fires back and Victoria grows quiet on the other end. He sighs to let some of the frustration out.

“Not busy enough to avoid checking in with me, Nathan.” Her voice is softer now, “is everything okay?”

I know. I’m sorry. Is what he should say. But he doesn’t, avoiding her question when he responds, “what do you want, Vic?”

“For you to talk to me, mostly. But right now? We need to talk Vortex. Are you around? I’m out on the football field.”

“Yeah. I’ll be there in 10.” He hangs up and is out of the boy’s dormitories soon after. The last thing he wants to do is talk about Vortex club business, but he thinks listening to Victoria ramble about something so mundane might help him feel a little normal right now. And God knows he needs it.

In the past week or so, Nathan hadn’t seen Victoria. Barely talked to her, too. Excuses of being too preoccupied with other things usually being the reason he blows her off. He wasn’t lying, not entirely. But he also wasn't telling her the extent of what was keeping him busy. The darker, much more sinister side of him that was taking over more and more of his life since being acquainted with–

No. He isn’t going to think about any of that right now. There was a reason he avoided picking up the call from before. For now, he’ll focus on putting one foot in front of the other, to meet up with Victoria and try his best to feel normal. *Be* normal. Far from the shitty day he’s had and far from the version of himself that came to school wielding a gun.

God, what has he become.

When stepping foot outside, Nathan takes note of how the once sunny afternoon sky has drastically switched to a cloud covered one. The dark gray above him charges the air like that before a storm, threatening to rain at any given moment.

Even the wind has picked up, making him wrap his jacket more tightly around himself as he takes the shortcut across the grass on the main campus. He barely checks for cars as he makes it to the stretch of road that divides the school from the football field. Once he’s across, Victoria can be spotted lounging on the bleachers with her usual groupies. She waves him over as soon as his feet touch the turf.

Stopping to stand in front of her with his hands buried in his pockets, she gives him a once over. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” Nathan replies flatly. *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.*

Victoria gets up from where she sits, tentatively taking hold of Nathan’s arm to steer him away from the others who continue chatting absentmindedly. “I mean, like, are you okay?” When she lets go, she moves in front of him with crossed arms, and as if only properly getting a look at him in that moment, her eyes widen with shock. "Oh my God, your face! What happened!?"

“It's nothing. I’m fine.”

"Um, that doesn't look like nothing, Nate. What the hell–"

"I said it's fine!" He snaps.

Doubt tightens Victoria's features, but she doesn't press him. "Fine, don't tell me." After an awkward beat, she proceeds to usher them to an empty section of the bleachers and sets down her shoulder bag. Nathan plops himself down on the metal bench, waiting for Victoria to pull out whatever she's digging around for. She procures a piece of paper, which she holds out for him with perfectly manicured fingers. "I wrote down everything we need for the party. Don't forget, since it's in a couple of days."

Ah, yes. The drugs. Nathan takes the paper and glances over the short list written out on the back of one of the Vortex flyers in Victoria's neat handwriting. Pretty much just the usual for a Vortex club party. He tries his best to fold it in a respectable enough manner before shoving it in his pocket. "Vic, you could have just texted me this."

She presses her lips into a thin line, that doubt still prevalent on her face. "Would you have answered?" Nathan gives a sarcastic grunt in reply. *Probably not.* Victoria takes a seat next to him, body turned towards him. "I'm worried about you, Nate."

He reflexively stands up, "don't be. I'm just busy. Y'know. Gotta lot of stuff to do…" Victoria continues to look unconvinced and Nathan drops his head, opting to kick some of the turf beneath his feet. "Don't worry, I'll get you the stuff. Talk to you later, alright."

Nathan's reeled back around and heading in the direction he'd come from, not giving Victoria the chance to say anything else or try to stop him. He shouldn't be surprised that she'd wanted something, pretty much everybody wanted something from him lately.

As if on cue, the hand he has firmly grasped around his phone deep in his pocket begins to vibrate. Nathan knows it's him again. Doesn't need to pull it out of his pocket to confirm but does so anyway.

When he does, a fat drop of water lands on the phone screen, distorting the anonymous caller ID beneath it. Nathan averts his attention upwards for its source to see a rapidly darkening sky. Another raindrop *plats* against his forehead this time, making him wince. *Should've seen that coming.* The wind has changed from breezy to forceful, too, sending a chill across his body that has him hunching in on himself as he pulls his jacket around him tighter.

Stepping under one of the trees littering the campus grounds as some half-ditch effort of finding shelter, Nathan lets out a long, shaky breath before finally picking up the call.

"What do you want?"

"Oh, Nathan. *That's* not the right way to answer these calls. But at least you did answer, right? Or was there a good reason for avoiding my previous calls?"

Irritation crawls along his spine. He tries to answer calmly but can't stop the slight shake in his voice, "I was with people."

“No. I expect you to pick up. Don’t ignore me again.”

Nathan’s clenching his fists again, unaware as he doesn’t know how to respond. But he doesn’t need to as the low voice on the other end continues, “we need to meet.”

Of course. Of course they do.

“When.”

“Soon. Wait for my call later tonight.”

“Fine.” Nathan hears a *click* that signals the call has ended. Walking out from beneath the tree he’d been situated under, he notices how there is now a steady downpour of rain. It’s quick to dampen his jacket, but he pays it no mind when making his way back to his dorm. He doesn’t even bother shedding himself of it once he’s inside his room.

He doesn’t sit down on his bed, or the chair at his desk. He can’t keep idle, not when his thoughts race and his legs are incapable of keeping still. The gentle tapping of rain against his window is the only company he has, the only noise filling the space besides the dull tread of his feet on the carpet as he picks up pacing once more.

There’s nothing to do now but wait. Wait to be called and told what to do. Like always.

He wishes he could talk to Victoria, *really* talk to her. To tell her everything going on. But it’s too much, and the thought of getting her involved with any of… *this*. His stomach clenches at the notion. No, she can never know.

He wishes he could speak with his sister, but she’s been gone for so long. Nathan doesn’t know how to talk to her anymore. She still sends emails, and as much as Nathan enjoys receiving them, he hasn’t responded in what feels like a year now. A little part of him is bitter. How is it fair that she managed to escape? To leave him behind. To be free of their name and what it means to have such a title hang over them. His own sister abandoning him to uphold the very mantle of being a Prescott all by himself. Left to deal with its crushing weight alone.

He even wishes there was a way to reach out to his father. The thought itself makes him scrunch up his face in resentment.

Weakness. That’s what his father would say. *A sign of weakness.* He’d berate Nathan for getting into such a messy situation in the first place. Tell him not to drag the Prescott name in the dirt behind him. The very idea of contacting his father would threaten the little bit of respect the man might hold for his son, if there was even any to begin with. Nathan doesn’t mean anything to his father, he knows that. He is just a problem for his family to deal with by being sent away to Blackwell. Something to patch up with more drugs, or *God forbid* more therapy. Therapy he hasn’t attended in who knows how long and medication left untouched in neon pill bottles that do nothing but collect dust on his desk. He doesn’t need them, anyway. *He doesn’t need them.*

With sudden spontaneity, he grabs at one of the bottles and launches it across the room at the wall he stands adjacent of. It explodes, sending a shrapnel of pills all over the place, but Nathan can barely see from how dark his room has become.

In the time he'd spent inside his head, night rolled in. Wind and rain still batter against his windows, though much more significantly. He blinks in the low light, wondering how he hadn't managed to notice its intensity. He glances over at the clock beside his bed. It glows a time just past 9 PM.

This waiting is hell. And he doesn't think he can take much more of it.

Now I really *need a cigarette.* He's reaching a frantic hand at his doorknob before he fully comprehends what it is he's doing. He's going to his truck. He's going to his truck to get a *fucking* cigarette because he wants to. And somehow, the rash decision feels like the only real thing Nathan has been in control of that whole day.

It's enough to make him continue out of the dormitories and into the cold downpour. He doesn't care how the rain pelts at him. He doesn't care how the wind makes him sway with every couple of steps, or how he now has to hold a hand to cover his eyes as he slowly moves his way across campus to the parking lot. He doesn't care when thunder rumbles ahead so violently that it shakes the ground under his feet, that he's caught stumbling around in a fucking storm. He doesn't care how he almost slips down the concrete steps into the parking lot, and how he latches onto the metal railing with a whitened grip to stop from tumbling down them.

He doesn't care about anything!

The blacktop of the lot is sleek from the rain, reflective as if taking on the likeness of a distorted mirror showing a warped image of the streetlights that dot along the edges of the school grounds. Visibility is shit, and Nathan is now completely drenched from his journey across Blackwell Academy. It's made him miserable.

He fumbles around for his car keys, cursing as he tries to dig them out. He stands there like an absolute fool, not getting any drier–but sure he's crossed the point of getting any wetter–when a strange sensation hits the space around him. He's confused for a moment, until a thought occurs to him. Though he is very much wet, there is a staticness to the air now that comes with an unusual warmth. In the second that follows after acknowledging this fact, Nathan braces himself for what he assumes will follow next, squeezing his eyes shut when a loud *crack* splits the air above him. What he does not anticipate, though, is the sound of a car screeching to a halt and the sudden impact that throws his body to the ground.

For the *third* time that day.

Chapter 3: without you

Chapter Summary

And so it begins.

Chapter Notes

THIS CHAP'S A HEFTY ONE FOLKS.

When Warren opens his eyes there are a lot of things that run through his brain. Most prominently among them, and at the forefront of his mind, is a simple: *huh.* Warren blinks his wide, disbelieving eyes owlishly. There's nothing. No wind, no rain, no lightning…no storm. And it's somehow daytime.

Okay then.

He's strangely calm about it, until a fact that comes rushing back to him makes him launch himself forward in his seat to peer at the ground in front of his car. *Oh shit.* Yup. He definitely hit something. With a still blank mind, Warren's body reacts for him, fumbling clumsily at the door handle to let himself out and almost trip his way around to the front of his car. *Shiiiiiiiit.*

There's a soggy, red heap on the ground.

No—a person.

Oh no, not a person.

Nathan Prescott.

He hit Nathan Prescott with his car.

Are you kidding me?

Warren might have laughed for the sole reason that this was some cruel twist of fate, except he might've just killed Nathan Prescott. That will *definitely* affect his chances of getting into Stanford University, he might as well throw his 4.0 GPA out the window at this point. *Oh my God I killed Nathan Prescott.* He's spiralling, quickly. And he doesn't realize he hasn't taken a breath since leaving the car until the red heap—that he has deduced is Nathan—stirs and lets out a long groan.

Crouching down next to him, Warren immediately has a grip on each of Nathan's shoulders as he rolls to his side, "oh fuck, you're alive!" *Okay, that was a little dramatic to yell in his face.*

Warren's sure Nathan is barely conscious enough at this point to even know what's going on, but it doesn't stop him from swatting away Warren's hands and spitting like some feral cat. *"Getthefuckoffme!"*

Straightening up, Warren can't help the relief that floods through him at Nathan's reaction. He *didn't* kill the guy, after all. *I can still go to Stanford.* "Oh my God, you're okay. I mean– are you? Are you okay?"

Nathan's now standing up beside him and Warren realizes how close they are. Only inches apart, really. Nathan seems to notice, too, as he gives Warren a quick yet scrutinizing once over before jabbing a finger into Warren's chest. "You? *Again?* How–no, I'm not okay. Ease the fuck up though, would you?"

Stumbling back a little, Warren rubs the spot that Nathan so forcefully prodded him with, "right, yeah…uh, sorry." He's able to properly take in Nathan's appearance now, still completely dripping wet as if walking straight out of a storm–which he *had*–to the point where a puddle has begun to form beneath his feet. That varsity jacket he always seems to wear has somehow grown, its arms sagging way past Nathan's hands and overall looking much more weighted than usual. His dark blonde hair sticks to his temples and neck in a wild fashion, droplets of water running down his cheek…and his neck, disappearing beneath the collar of his shirt–

"Can you stop looking at me like some freak science experiment that you're trying to analyze?"

Warren's attention immediately snaps back to the situation at hand, his eyes averting back to Nathan's hard stare that bores into him, "right, s-sorry!" Warren apologizes again, mentally cursing himself for making the already awkward situation ten times more awkward. He thinks of a way to rectify it, though it's on impulse that he suddenly shoots out a hand in offering to Nathan, "I guess first things first, I'm Warren Graham."

At first, Nathan doesn't do anything, then his eyes narrow to slits and Warren thinks he might get decked in the face by him. Again. "I know who the fuck you are, dumbass."

"You do!?" Warren doesn't mean to sound as surprised as he is, clearing his throat after a second, "I, uh, didn't think you did." He still holds out an extended hand, which Nathan looks down at as if Warren just offered him a cake made out of dogshit. But before he has the chance to retract it, Nathan turns one eighty degrees and proceeds to stomp away. "Uh… wait, where are you going?"

"Away." Nathan responds without turning around.

"Away?" Warren repeats, trying to catch up. "Where?"

"I don't know, to get some dry fucking clothes for starters."

Warren supposes he has a point, the guy was sopping wet. He gives a slight shrug while continuing to follow behind Nathan. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. But I’m also slightly concerned over–well–pretty much everything that–”

“Without you.” Nathan reels back around to face Warren, making him come to a sudden halt and try his best to avoid crashing into him. The words, full of venom, cut Warren off. “I don’t know what the fuck just happened, or why the storm we were caught in two minutes ago has somehow miraculously disappeared and it’s *fucking daytime,”* he digs a finger into Warren’s chest again, forcing him to take a couple of steps backwards, “but I do know that you’re right at the centre of it all. So stay the fuck away from me.”

Ow. This time Warren doesn't bother to say anything, or follow, when Nathan continues walking away from Warren and out of the parking lot. *Suits me just fine,* he thinks to himself. After all, he had been trying to avoid the guy since the whole incident earlier that day. If Max could have seen the complete and utter trainwreck that occurred just now–with Warren stupidly trying to introduce himself, nonetheless–he can’t bare to think it. He brings a hand to rub over his face, letting out a strangled groan. *How embarrassing.*

But embarrassment aside, Warren is finally able to ponder upon the very strange occurrence of the storm and its sudden disappearance. He drops his hand, casting his gaze upwards to the cloudless sky, no hint of a storm ever having happened. *Something is off…* There’s no way he could have been imagining it, not when he’d been driving in it mere minutes ago. Not when Nathan was proof of how badly it had been raining due to his soaked and dishevelled state.

It made no sense.

“You okay, my dude?” Beside Warren stands a guy who’s currently stopped to check him out and Warren doesn’t have to glance over to know that it’s Trevor, judging from his cropped black hair and baggy skater clothes that can be made out in his peripheral vision.

“Oh, hey Trevor. I’m okay, it’s just been a…strange day.”

“Trevor?” The guy questions, prompting Warren to actually look at him. The Trevor he thought was Trevor wasn’t Trevor upon closer inspection…Though he looked strikingly similar. Too much so for it to be a coincidence. *Does Trevor have a brother? No, he would know that…* “Sorry dude, you must have me confused with someone else. Pretty tubular name though, if I do say so myself, so I’m not mad about it.”

Tubular? Warren hasn’t heard that one… pretty much ever before in his life.

“And I’ll say, strange indeed, my dude. I was just asking since you’re staring into space and your car’s smokin’ away.”

Not Trevor certainly talked as much as actual Trevor, *wait*–“my car’s smoking?” The guy shrugs, pointing behind Warren and sure enough, when whipping around to face his car, there’s a cloud of smoke forming at the back end.

Oh shit. Warren’s running over to his poor old Chevy, dancing on his feet a little in his hesitation to even touch it in case the whole thing goes up in flames. *Shit shit shit.* It dawns

on him that the smoke doesn't actually look like it's coming *from* the car but rather *within* it. He furrows his brows together, curious at what that could possibly mean when a thought occurs to him. He tentatively reaches out a hand to pull open the door to the back seat, confirming that it is indeed not his car, but rather his time machine–*thesis project*–that was to blame.

Warren stares at it open mouthed like an idiot, because he doesn't understand. A creeping suspicion forms in his mind, one that he's quick to shake off because *no*. But it's hard not to piece together the storm and how he was *sure* he'd been struck by lightning–which happened to be enough energy to power his time machine–right before being launched into a stormless, bright and sunny day.

But no, *no way.*

Out of curiosity–and if only to squash any lingering doubts on the ridiculous idea–Warren pops his head out of his car to zero in on not Trevor, who has luckily hung around and is toeing his skateboard idly. "Hey," he calls out, "uh, what year is it?"

If it's a weird question to ask, not Trevor doesn't let it show as he barely even blinks when responding, "1983, my dude." He waggles a 'hang loose' gesture with his hand, but Warren can't fully comprehend it. His eyes drift back to the time machine, almost laughing because no. No, *no, nope. Nahhhhh.* That's a joke, not Trevor's just messing with him.

But then his gaze focuses on the digital interface of his time machine, which still glows with the date he'd set it to back at the lab. The date he'd insisted on wanting to travel to. The date October 7th, 1983.

Fuck.

-

He has to tell Nathan.

...right? Would it really be so bad if Warren didn't? On one hand, the guy kinda deserves walking aimlessly around a Blackwell 30 years prior to their current time. *Or future time.* Especially since Warren still doesn't feel inclined to go anywhere near Nathan, who will most likely rip Warren to shreds once he does mention the fact that they've been launched back in time. If Nathan believes Warren, that is.

Warren barely believes it himself, still wrestling with his own mind at the sheer impossibility of it all. The idea of him dreaming all of it up definitely crossing his mind, but Warren rarely dreamed and never this vividly. Things were too real.

And on the other hand…there's no way that Warren, in good conscience, can let Nathan go about like this unknowingly. As much as Warren hates the guy, he can't leave him stuck here.

He considers that Nathan might not have been involved in the accidental time travel were it not for Warren in the first place, having hit him with his car at the exact moment it got struck by lightning which Warren presumes is when they got spat back out in 1983. It's only right that he tries to amend Nathan's unintentional involvement.

So when Warren finally snaps out of his dissociative state of acceptance, he goes after Nathan. Except…he doesn't know exactly *where* he's run off to, no way of knowing in which direction to head past leaving the parking lot. All Warren has to go on is that Nathan intended to find a change of clothes. Naturally, his dorm room is the most likely place he'd want to go. The only issue is that Nathan's room…isn't his room anymore. He can only assume it's vacated by a student attending Blackwell during the current time they've been sent to.

Rolling the back windows of his car down just enough to let the remainder of the smoke escape, Warren clicks his car keys over his shoulder to lock the Chevy as he bolts out of the lot, waving a tentative goodbye to not Trevor as he goes. If he's right, and Nathan's headed to the dormitories, then Warren has to catch up. Quickly.

As much as the fact remains that he's been sent back in time 30 years ago, it's very much still October with the same notorious chill in the air. Warren makes haste across the school grounds, taking in the people he passes as he does so. Blackwell Academy itself looks exactly as it does 30 years in the future, its tall, orange-bricked building standing ageless while nestled at the foot of Arcadia Bay's hilly forests.

What really strikes Warren are the students that loiter around campus, their image alone a true representation of the '80s. Neon and denim donned by nearly every person around him, with hair so voluminous or slick with gel he wonders how early each student has to get up before classes just to style it. The amount of gel some of them use would give Nathan a run for his money.

If he wasn't in such a rush, Warren might have ogled the people he passed more thoroughly. He's glad that at the very least, the layout of the school is the exact same, so he doesn't have to worry about getting lost in his frantic race to the dormitories as much as getting lost in the crowd of people. Warren narrowly manages to break through the crowded steps down to the courtyard, squeezing between a couple of guys carrying a ridiculously large boombox that he thinks is a bit *too* on the nose for the setting with a strangled *'scuse me!'* before seeing a flash of red at the building's entrance.

"Nathan, hey, wait up!" but he doesn't. Because of *course* he doesn't. He's out of breath when he finally catches up, planting himself in front of Nathan like a roadblock in his path, arms spread out on either side of him. "Listen, I know this is going to sound crazy, but this isn't the Blackwell we know. Somehow we've been sent back in time to 1983…"

Nathan's stopped now, and Warren waits for him to react. But all he does is stare blankly back at him. Then something like heated annoyance flashes behind his eyes. "Oh gee. No way."

"You're.. strangely calm about it." Warren drops his arms, taking on a slightly skeptical expression.

“Yup.”

Warren’s face falls, “you don’t believe me.”

“Nope.”

“Okay, okay, I can explain–” Nathan’s already pushing past him, even as Warren continues to ramble on in some sort of attempt at convincing him, following him up the set of stairs that lead to the dorms. Nathan slips inside the building, and Warren almost has the door slam in his face behind him. “My thesis for science class, that thing that you smashed to pieces? It’s a time machine I’ve been building–and then fixing. Not a real one! Or–it wasn’t *supposed* to be. But there was a storm, right? And then there wasn’t, because what I *think* happened is the energy from a bolt of lightning from the storm hitting my car somehow launched *us*–since I, uh, hit you with the car at the same time–all the way back to–”

“Stop talking.”

Warren does, only because Nathan’s suddenly halted and reached out his arms at their full length to keep Warren from running into him, holding him in place. The contact jolts him and keeps him quiet after Nathan drops his arms and begins to dig in his pocket for something. It’s a key, his dorm key, Warren assumes, making him look around where they’ve stopped in front of Nathan’s room. And parallel from it across the hall, Warren’s room. *Future room.*

It’s eerie how similar everything looks. Part of Warren can’t blame Nathan for taking literally anything he’s said as true, considering the two of them aren’t even friends to begin with. They’re barely acquaintances, Warren wanting next to nothing to do with the guy before today. “Nathan, I really don’t think you should–”

“Hey, Prescott!” Whatever Warren was going to say dies in his throat when he’s interrupted by the booming shout that echoes down the hallway toward them. Both boys whip their heads in the direction it came from to see a big, burly guy. Hardly someone Warren might suspect to be a student attending Blackwell from the looks of him. Maybe students in the ’80s were just built different.

Instead of facing them like Warren expects, the guy is forcefully pounding at one of the doors a couple rooms down from where they stand. It comes to an abrupt stop when the door suddenly whips open and reveals the student Warren can only assume whose room it belongs to. He has blonde hair, styled out of his face in a way that represented the current time period they were in yet also maintained a certain air of maturity to it. He’d answered the door with a scrutinizing demeanour, offering a slightly demoralizing, “what is it?” Kurt and equally commanding. “Did my father send you?” it comes out as a scoff more than anything else, and Warren almost flinches on behalf of the dude at the other end of the interaction from how harsh it sounds.

“Yes, family business.” the burly guy gruffly responds.

“It’s about time, I’ve been waiting for ages. I swear sometimes I think I’m the only competent one in this damn family.” The student’s ushering burly guy in with an impatient

motion of his hand, glancing down the hallway to assure their discretion before deeming it relatively good enough–Warren assumes–when he slams the door shut once more.

"I totally thought he was talking to you for a second, almost crapped my pants–" Warren's breathing out in relief but cuts himself off after turning back to Nathan. His face has drained of all colour, resembling that of a sheet of white paper, and his eyes have blown wide with some sort of disbelief, gaze still fixed past Warren.

It clicks in place for Warren then, his rational mind finally catching up with the rest of him as he quickly sucks in a breath, "was that…? Is that your *dad!?"* He says it under his breath, fixing Nathan with a pointed expression, but the guy is clearly far from the conversation at hand. Without warning, Nathan's pushing past Warren back the way they'd come in, leaving Warren dumbstruck before calling after him yet again and willing himself to follow. "Where are you going now!?"

But of course, there is no answer, just a frantic Nathan to follow after as he launches out of the building. He walks right up to the first person he spots, an unsuspecting student lounging against the railing of the dorm steps who is chatting with some of his friends. The guy eyes Nathan intensely when he corners him and points a finger at his raised hand. "Give me one." His cigarette, that's what Nathan is interested in, and now extorting this poor guy over. Warren thinks he's gone feral.

"Uhh…" the guy starts, his and his friends' laughter immediately cut off by the unexpected disruption that is Nathan, who remains rooted to the spot, eyes narrowing further.

"Now."

Warren's shocked to find the guy start rooting in his pocket, fumbling as he brings out a pack and then a single cigarette from within it. Nathan snatches it and walks off without so much as a 'thank you'. Warren offers them an apologetic smile as he runs past, their frozen state of shock imprinted in his mind.

"What was all that about?" Warren's caught up with Nathan now, who's ceased his alarmingly fast pace to stop and dig a hand into his still soggy jacket.

"Neededa fuckin' cigarette," Nathan mumbles around said object now sticking out of his mouth.

"Right." Warren's pretty sure he could've figured that much out himself. "You good?"

"Mm'fine." He produces a lighter, cupping a hand over the flame as he ignites it and brings it to the end of the cigarette. Warren watches as Nathan hastily sucks in, the action greedy as if he was using an inhaler after having an asthma attack. It accentuates his already prominent cheekbones and Warren realizes he's staring for a socially unacceptable amount of time again when Nathan's eyes flick up to his under heavy lids.

"I, uh–I, are you sure?" Warren devastatingly stutters out. "Just because, you know, that was your dad and all, which pretty much proves what I've been trying to say…" he trails off toward the end, unable to hold Nathan's penetrating stare.

“I’m fuckin’ dandy, alright? So you can leave me alone now.”

“What? No–come on, dude! We need to get back, and the best chance of that happening is if we stick together.”

“I said, fuck off, Graham.”

“Listen, I get it, this is all pretty fucking crazy. At first I thought this was…” Warren reflexively runs a hand through his hair. “At first I thought this was some insanely detailed dream my mind managed to conjure up. But it’s not! Somehow we’ve both ended up in 1983–”

“No thanks to *you.”* Nathan hisses out.

“I know, and I’m sorry! But we *need* to try to get back, so please!” His hands motion erratically in front of him, *“please* try to be a *little* more helpful with this. Try to be less–” he cuts himself off, not knowing exactly how to express what it is he’s trying to say.

“‘Nathan’?” Nathan suggests, eyes narrowing and lips pressed down into a thin-lipped frown. “Less like myself? Less crazy?”

Warren’s quiet because, *yeah.* That’s basically what he’d meant, without fully thinking it, at least. He’d never openly admit that, though.“No!” Warren sighs, finding his own frustration building and trying his best to let it fizzle out. Of *course* it has to be Nathan Prescott of *all* the people he is stuck in time with. It would have been manageable with literally *anyone* else, hell, it might have even been *fun* with Max. The thought of trying to figure it all out on his own the only thing motivating him to pursue Nathan so fervently at this point. “I need your help, Nathan." Warren finally admits.

He scoffs at that, which comes out eerily similar to when his dad had done the same only a moment ago.

Just then a noise that sounds like a smothered animal of some sort erupts in the air between them. Startled, Warren can’t help the way his attention snaps to the culprit, which happens to be Nathan’s stomach. He then looks back up at Nathan, “you…hungry?”

“No,” Nathan immediately retorts. An awkward silence follows, Warren not exactly knowing what to do in this sort of situation with a guy you kinda hate but can't walk away from like you want to do ‘cause you need his cooperation but his stomach just growled at you and now you’re just staring at each other and no one wants to break the silence because *what* do you say after something like that, not to mention he’s still wet from the storm they’d escaped, though, not dripping like he’d been previously but still damp enough to the point where Warren thinks it must be uncomfortable and even his hair has dried somewhat, making the ends curl, a detail that Warren is strangely hung up on, *since when did Nathan have slightly curly hair–*

“You’re doing it again—“

“—I’m sorry.”

An idea then crosses Warren's mind, grabbing at his butt pockets with both hands in search of–*yes.* He still has his wallet. He's thankful that he'd come to the past somewhat *semi-*prepared with a few necessities. Extracting it, he unfolds the wallet and finds two twenty dollar bills inside. Nathan's eyeing him skeptically all the while, brows drawn together with scrutiny but not without interest at what Warren is doing.

"How about this," he holds the bills up, "we go to Two Whales to get some food in you–"

"You trying to get in my pants? I can buy my own dinner, thanks." Nathan's smirking triumphantly at what Warren can only assume is a successful attempt at a jab at him. Warren tries not to roll his eyes at his stupid interruption.

"Yeah? You don't really strike me as the type of guy who's carrying wads of cash in his drenched-through jacket."

The realization dawns on Nathan's face, smirk promptly falling away. He takes another drag of his cigarette, scowl back in place. "Fine. So what's in it for you then?"

It's Warren's turn to smile now, flashing Nathan his teeth when he responds, "I get you some food, you spend the time it takes to eat going over ways we can get back to our time with me. Deal?"

He can tell that Nathan isn't overly fond of the idea, his mouth pulled down with an air of disgust. But then he rolls his eyes. "Fine. Whatever."

-

Warren opts to use his car to drive the two of them to the diner. As much as taking a bus may have been preferred, saving the little bit of cash won out in favour over having to sit in a still somewhat smoking car. To be fair, the smoking came primarily from the reactor still buckled in the back seat, not the car itself. That and a still smoking Nathan, who salvaged the rest of his cigarette right up until the butt, which Warren tells him to finish outside the car before getting in.

"Why? Your car smells burnt to shit anyways."

"Burnt metal and plastic can air out, cigarette smoke becomes part of the car."

"Doubt it…" Nathan says under his breath as he finishes his cigarette, dropping it to the ground to crush under his heel. Warren gets in behind the wheel of his car and Nathan slips in on the passenger side. There's something so odd about it all, Nathan sitting in his car beside him. It's weird just being around the guy without being targeted in some way. He can't recall many times in the past that they've crossed paths, really. The only interactions consisted of passing each other in the halls where Warren altogether avoided looking his way. It was always brief, and Warren never felt the need to linger. Nothing like the physical altercation

that now feels like ages ago. Taking place in the same parking lot that they're currently sitting in now. *Yeesh.*

Driving isn't so bad, if not a little awkward. The smoke actually stopped a while ago by the looks of it. The slight hazy aftermath all that is truly left in its wake, nothing a brief roll down of their windows didn't solve. Warren's internally thankful he'd opened the windows earlier, too, before chasing Nathan down so as to avoid hotboxing the interior of the vehicle.

They eventually make it to the Two Whales diner, finding the lot to be relatively busy. Nathan's eager to exit the car, and Warren scrambles to follow after him in what is quickly becoming routine for the two of them, but not before collecting his backpack from the back seat.

The light *jingle* of the diner door opening is quickly drowned out by the crowd of people inside. Warren feels like he's just stepped foot into a movie by the look of the place and the people that inhabited it. Not to mention a much more loved jukebox that is in full swing. The diner had its busy days, sure, but Warren has never seen it like this, so lively and full of other teens. It must have been the hotspot for Arcadia Bay back in the day because the place was packed.

It all seems to be dawning on Nathan, too, standing beside Warren in the entryway with a slightly overwhelmed look about him. Warren has no idea how he's taking the whole 'travelling back in time to the 1980s' thing internally, but externally he'd been holding up pretty well. Almost too well, other than when he'd seen his father, which solidified what Warren had been trying to tell him all along.

After the brief moment of being blasted by this past version of the diner, they walk over to what looks to be the only free booth–which happens to be Warren's booth of choice whenever coming here– towards the back of the room. Warren and Nathan slide in opposite of one another, and Warren can't help but notice the almost new condition and vibrant colour of the seats.

Two Whales has always been a place of sanctuary to Warren, spending countless nights studying for his classes over a constant flow of their signature coffee. Or even the occasional visit with Max for lunch to chat about the latest movies they've watched. It's safe to say Warren was familiar with the worn and graffitied tables, the wear of pleather on the faded booths, and even how the Jukebox would glitch and play a song unprompted after sitting idle for a solid couple of hours. Warren's aware of how time had taken its toll on the old diner but continues to hold a certain fondness over even these minuet flaws. So when he's sitting there now in the days of its prime, Warren can't help but find himself a little emotional at its pristine condition. All that's missing is–

"Welcome to the Two Whales, can I start y'all off with some coffee?" Warren peers up from his seat to see a young waitress giving him an all too familiar warm smile and a quirked eyebrow. Her long, blonde hair is pulled into its usual high ponytail as she leans on the table with one hand on her hip and the other branding a coffee pot, steaming and waiting to be poured.

Warren is staring with his mouth gaping open, noticing that Nathan is surprisingly mirroring his expression, the both of them fully gawking at the girl. The girl that Warren has no doubt is Joyce. Her complexion is much more youthful, though she still has the same easygoing glint in her eyes.

When the two continue to stare in stunned silence, her brows crease together in concern, “did y’all…need some time to think it over? I can come back…”

“Uh…” Warren dumbly responds, aware of how his mouth still hangs open, which he quickly snaps shut.

“I’ll come back,” she concludes, giving them a wink. And then she’s gone.

The two immediately lock eyes for a split second before frantically lowering their heads closer together within the booth,“did you see–!”

“Was that–!?!”

“No *way* that was–”

“–Joyce!” Warren finishes whisper-shouting between themselves. The excitement in the air quickly dissipates as Warren clears his throat and Nathan’s already leaning back in his seat. “First your dad, then Joyce, not to mention all the wack fashion and technology,” Warren’s counting on his fingers as he lists all the proof he’s seen since leaving his car after the storm, “you have *got* to believe that we travelled back in time now.”

“80s fashion is better than whatever you call *that,*” Nathan nods at Warren, looking him up and down.

Warren frowns, “what’s wrong with my clothes?” It’s not that he disagrees with the statement, hell, Warren totally nerds out over all stuff 80s. The video games, the movies, the old world tech, but he can’t deny himself a good graphic tee.

“Where to begin…”Nathan mutters from behind a menu that he’s conjured up like a wall between them.

In a stroke of courage, Warren places a hand on top of the menu to press it flat against the table, “but you believe me right? About–” he throws a cautious glance around them, lowering his voice when he turns back to Nathan, “about ending up in 1983…”

Nathan takes a second before he replies, his expression suddenly unreadable, “yeah. I believe you.”

Warren exhales in relief, sinking back into his seat. Nathan believes him. And Warren believes Nathan when he says he believes him. He doesn’t realize how desperate he is for the justification. Perhaps it’s only for the sake of knowing he isn't losing it. They really *did* get sent back in time.

Oh fuck, we really are stuck in 1983. A new wave of anxiety washes over Warren, Nathan confirming what he already knows hitting him with the reality and severity of the situation all

over again. *How the fuck are we going to get back.*

“I can’t choose between the waffle or house special.”

Blinking, Warren stares at Nathan, who is back to looking over the menu in his hands. This whole thing is crazy, sure, and Warren still doesn't understand how it is at all plausible, but at least he isn’t alone. At least he has someone to keep him grounded, someone who is in the same boat as he is and assure him he’s not going crazy.

“You look crazy.”

Nathan’s now staring at him and Warren hadn’t realized he’s pressed his fingers into his hair on either side of his head, elbows leaning against the table edge. He drops his hands if only to retain some semblance of keeping up a totally sane appearance. “Yeah, just…freaking out a little.”

“I can see that. Anyways, I can’t choose between the–”

“You can have some of my Belgian waffle. I usually don’t finish it anyway… That way you can order the house special.”

Joyce makes her way back to the table and they order their food, she mentally notes everything while pouring their coffees before passing it along to the kitchen. They down their coffees in unison. Warren can’t remember the last time he had something to eat, thinking back to the coffee shop he’d driven to to fix the reactor before the storm and how it was the last place he’d consumed anything. The smell of bacon frying is enough to make his mouth start watering but the anticipation of digging into the diner’s famous waffles manages to hold him over.

“Okay. Let's go over what we know…” he takes a deep breath, crossing his hands on the table between them. Nathan looks back at Warren with little to no interest when breaching the subject, so Warren begins. “We got sent 30 years into the past. A fact most likely due to my *totally not meant to be real reactor* I built for my thesis project…which then became an actual time machine, with my car as a vessel, when activated after absorbing enough energy from a well timed lightning bolt brought on by the storm.”

The words come out in a rush, left to hang in the air between them. *Wow.* Some people say it can be cathartic to voice everything out loud, but Warren only comes to the conclusion that this whole situation is completely fucking bonkers.

“So, how come my ass came along for the joyride?” Nathan questions, to which Warren is thankful of. Anything to keep him from internally spiralling on the matter.

“Honestly, I’m surprised it didn’t kill you,” Warren blurts out, the image of Nathan in lump formation in front of his car flashing before his mind. It sends a shiver across his whole body which he tries to shake off. “It makes no sense, but none of this really makes any sense. I think I’ll go crazy if I *try* to make sense of it.” Just thinking about it is enough to make his head hurt, putting his thoughts out in the open becoming a whole new level of weird.

The sweet and savoury aroma of their food hits Warren before he actually sees it, turning his head just as an incoming Joyce places their heaping plates of food down in front of them. He's ravenous at this point, not holding back with knife and fork already equipped in each hand as he begins to demolish the generously garnished waffle before him. It's topped with strawberries, blueberries, chocolate sauce, ice cream, and whipped cream which he haphazardly cuts himself a piece of with the attempt at getting a little bit of everything in one bite. He fails, naturally, as the blueberry he'd forked on falls away and the dollop of ice cream dejectedly *plops* in the space between the plate and his mouth. But he doesn't care, it's still the most delicious thing he's ever tasted in his entire life.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter." Warren thinks aloud, the words muffled from speaking around a mouth full of waffle. He swallows to continue, "we don't have to figure out *why* we came here, all that's important is how we get back."

Nathan, who's taken a much more retained approach to eating his own food, shrugs in response. "Sure." He's far more interested in his meal than the conversation, so Warren lets him indulge.

Inhaling the rest of his waffle, Warren makes sure to leave a solid quarter for Nathan. "Time to devise a plan," he pushes the remainder of his waffle beside Nathan's plate, making room for all the things currently in his possession. He begins by taking out his car keys–adorned with a keychain of the millennium falcon–his wallet, phone, and the USB drive Max returned to him, placing them down on the table. Once his pockets are empty, he swivels to begin unpacking his bag. There isn't too much within, namely his pencil case consisting of the tools he'd taken to the coffee shop to fix his reactor and his notebook full of notes on the machine as well as a list of materials he'd used to build it–coming in more handy now than ever.

"What are you doing?" Nathan's finished his food, moving onto the bit of waffle Warren has left him and sending a furrow-browed look over all the items Warren has placed on the table.

"Taking out everything I have with me. Maybe something here can help us." It was a long shot, but Warren thinks it's worth trying. At the very least, it couldn't hurt.

To Warren's astonishment, Nathan starts doing the same. He digs into his pockets to produce a lighter, a set of keys, a folded up flyer–thoroughly dampened by the way it flops on the table–and his own cell phone. He places them adjacent to Warren's pile in a substantially neater fashion. Upon doing so he proceeds to shed his varsity jacket and cardigan–equally as soggy–underneath it so he's left with only a black tee. Warren notes how he doesn't think he's actually ever seen him without his jacket before, being a staple to who Nathan is in his mind.

Then Nathan's back to eating, leaving Warren to freely examine everything in their combined collection. There isn't much to go over–lighter, USB, dorm room keys–most of which are items of little use to their predicament. Their phones, too, which are nothing more than digital bricks in this time. Upon further examination Warren can't help but notice the poor shape Nathan's is in, a spider web-like crack covering more than half of the screen. *Must be nice to have the money not to care over safeguarding such things,* Warren thinks to himself with slight disdain. He tries not to let it fester, but it's difficult when he'd spent the entirety of the summer before moving to Blackwell Academy working a shitty part-time job just so he could

afford to upgrade his own while people like Nathan just got whatever they wanted whenever they wanted.

His eyes travel back up to where Nathan sits quietly crouched over the remainder of his meal–or, the leftover meal Warren gave him. It's a stark contrast to the angry, spitting, frantic version he'd been stuck with for the last handful of hours. His focus migrates to the still-angry looking scratch marks on his cheek, then lower to a bruise that's beginning to form along his jaw. *Was that from punching him earlier?* Warren presses his lips together, he'd never been one to get into physical altercations, he might have still avoided doing so were it not for Max being involved. The thought of his friend walking away from the confrontation with a bloody nose more terrifying than it happening to himself, and all because of some stupid run-in between them in the bathroom.

Warren still doesn't know what went down in the bathroom between the guy now sitting across from him and Max, and what caused Nathan to go full rage after her like that. Although, he supposes it doesn't take much for someone like Nathan. Warren still wants to know, desperately, but part of him convinces himself now's not the time. Especially with how calm Nathan is for the time being. Warren doesn't want to risk setting him off again.

As if suddenly aware, Nathan shifts under Warren's quickly-growing noticeable gaze, making Warren dart his attention back down to their things strewn about the table. He latches onto the first thing–which happens to be the flyer–reaching over to pick it up and unfolding it under the guise that he'd sought to do so in the first place.

Written across the back, smudged but still legible enough, is a neatly printed list of…drugs. *Ah. Of course.* The lettering is too neat to be Nathan's hand, though other than that fact there's really nothing else of significance to the paper. That is, until he turns it over to examine the flyer itself. The list of drugs aptly makes more sense now as Warren realizes it's a poster for the upcoming Vortex club party. The same poster he'd seen in the hallway what seems like eons ago, all crazy fonts and neon graphic design. Horribly done, in Warren's opinion. He wonders if Nathan had any involvement, but before he can ask, something catches his eye.

Holding the poster a little further away from his face, Warren takes the time to properly read it.

Enter the Vortex Club: Struck by Lightning Party. It's Going to be Electric!
Don't miss out.
October 10th.

October 10th. *Of course!* Warren wants to laugh–or cry–with joy. That feeling of *eureka!* hitting him as if theorizing in class or taking a test and suddenly finding the exact answer he'd been looking for. *Eureka!* like he'd been Archimedes exiting the bathtub, but instead of discovering volume displacement in regards to water, it's of how they'll get back home.

"Why are you grinning like that?"

"Like a genius?" Warren offers, smiling as he lets the poster fall on the table.

“Like an idiot.”

“Because this is it! This is how we get back home! Look,” Warren smooths out the poster in front of Nathan so it’s facing the right way around for him. “Do you see? October 10th!”

Nathan tilts his head down to study it, going from a deep frown to a slightly-less-furrowed frown. “The anniversary of when the statue outside Blackwell got struck by lightning…30 years ago.”

“Exactly! That's in 4 days. Another bolt of lightning, another bolt of energy to send us on our way.” Warren excitedly explains, though Nathan doesn’t seem to share his enthusiasm.

“What about your thesis thingy? Isn’t it fucked from getting us here in the first place?”

“It is, but luckily I have all my notes with me right here,” he pats his notebook fondly.

“Okay… but how are you actually going to fix the thing?”

“I have an idea for that, too. Who’s to say we aren’t still students attending Blackwell Academy? We simply gain access to the science labs and I’m positive I can get the reactor back up and running.” Nathan lets out a reserved *hmm* while Warren’s already running through the process in his head. “We might need to replace some materials, but I’m sure it’s doable. Then all that’s left is securing a proper line of power from the impact of where the lightning is supposed to strike on the 10th.”

Something dreadful occurs to him then, halting his burst of elation in its tracks. In order for this to work, they need to know not only the place but the *precise* time the lightning will strike. They didn’t exactly have the option to wait it out for the entirety of the day, not without raising suspicion, at least. *How the hell are we going to figure out the exact time it will happen? There’s no way they can even figure something like that out–*

“10:04 P.M.”

Warren blinks.

Nathan rolls his eyes, “I could see you freaking out.”

“But how? How do you know?”

Nathan taps the poster, “it’s a Vortex party. Vic and I had to come up with the theme. She does most of the planning and research behind them, but,” he shrugs, “I thought of the idea after going through one of my father’s books on the history of Arcadia Bay.”

If Warren didn’t have more self-restraint–or a table between them–he might have hugged the guy right then and there. This was going to work. *Their plan was going to work.* His excitement from before comes rushing back. So much so that he doesn’t get the chance to be hung up over the fact that Nathan Prescott took the time to read a history book. “That settles it then! We have 4 days to fix the reactor and be sent back into the future. This is going to work.”

Nathan's gone quiet again, prodding at a lone blueberry halfheartedly. Warren's too distracted to notice from the anticipation bubbling within him. With a plan ready to go and their food long finished, he flags down Joyce for their bill. She takes their plates and tells them she'll be back in a minute, leaving the two in each other's company once more. A silence falls between them filled only by the clanging of cutlery and distant conversation from the diner's other patrons. It leaves Warren with difficulty at finding something to say. He has the option of staying silent, though he's never been one to sit comfortably in it.

His focus shifts erratically around the diner's setting but eventually finds its way back to Nathan, clearing his throat when he does so. "How's your cheek?"

"It's alright. How's your nose?" he counters flatly, making Warren wonder how he can remain so calm after everything they're currently going through. Calm in the sense that he isn't freaking out about the whole time travel thing even half as much as Warren is. Nathan still retains his anger–as dormant as it may be at the moment–but that's just who he is.

"Okay." He answers. It was true, the pain had long subsided since getting smashed into at the parking lot. It only really stings when he touches it. Safe to say it isn't broken. He thinks all things considered, Nathan probably has it worse. "I'm sorry, by the way."

Confusion is evident on Nathan's face, amongst the usual scrutiny.

"For hitting you with my car. I'm sorry, I never apologized for, uh…that."

That same blank stare turned into something venomous that Warren received earlier is back as Nathan's eyes narrow and stare daggers toward him.

"W-what?" Warren stutters out, slightly taken aback by the sudden flip, and harsh expression pointed his way.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend to care. About my fucking cheek or getting me back to 20*fucking*13 or apologizing for shit like we're friends or something."

Warren frowns, not having anticipated the sudden lash of anger from Nathan, "I wasn't–"

"Wasn't what? Trying to help me? Don't act all fucking selfless, Graham. Why bother helping me at all?"

"I guess I…feel like you're my responsibility."

As capricious as ever, the anger momentarily melts away when Nathan's face contorts back to confusion.

Warren sighs before deciding to elaborate, "It's my fault you're here, isn't it? I accidentally brought you with me, so it's only right that I try and get you back to our time, too."

Nathan's face drops, Warren finding it hard to get a read on him as he grabs his phone and turns away to shrug his varsity jacket back on. "Well, don't worry about it. I'm absolving you of any responsibility. You've got your plan, now you can leave me the fuck out of it."

"Why?" Warren demands, stone-faced and trying hard to sound commanding when he directs the question at Nathan. It's enough to gain Nathan's attention back. "Why won't you try to figure this out together?"

"Because we're not friends!" Nathan shouts, jolting up from where he's sitting to lean over the table, and by extension, into Warren's face. "I'm not your problem. So don't act like it, okay?" He doesn't give Warren the opportunity to respond this time, storming off to leave Warren as the sole occupant to their booth before he even gets the chance to fully process what just happened.

Whatever Warren expected to transpire from the conversation, it definitely isn't the turn of events he's now faced with. And yet after everything he can't help thinking back to what Max said about Nathan during their phone call. How she felt bad for him and that something was going on with him. Warren's sure Nathan wouldn't appreciate her pity, but he's starting to understand she might be right. That there is more to Nathan than he'd originally thought.

"Everything all good, hun?" Joyce returns to the table, bill in hand and a look of concern creasing her features. He gives what he hopes is a reassuring nod. She returns one that's just as convincing before leaving the bill with him. Warren places his money on top and begins to put all his stuff from the table back into his bag, making sure to grab the Vortex club poster and Nathan's lighter that he left behind.

Waving his departure to Joyce behind the counter, Warren finds Nathan standing at the curb just outside the diner, his frame illuminated by the harsh neon light of the Two Whales sign. He approaches, though hesitantly, offering a thin-lipped smile in hopes of it acting as an olive branch when Nathan looks over his shoulder. He looks back to the road in front of him, somehow not running off or turning around to clock Warren in the face like he half expects him to, which he considers a win.

Nathan fidgets with a cigarette in his hands, Warren not having the faintest idea of how he managed to get another one. He then takes out Nathan's lighter, holding it out to him. Warren decides to let the silence linger this time, seeing if Nathan will be the one to initiate anything between them.

Nathan takes the lighter from Warren's hand, sticking one end of the cigarette in his mouth to light the other. He takes a drag, exhaling slowly, then shuffles on his feet. "You're my ride back to school."

Ah. There it is.

"Listen, I'm sorry–" Nathan throws him a warning glance more threatening than any glance Warren has received before,"–I mean, no more apologizing, right–I just want to say that I get we're not friends. And though you don't *actuallyreally* need to be friends with someone in order to apologize to them–"

“I swear to God, Graham.”

“Not the point, right,” Warren takes a deep breath. Right now is not the ideal time to be rambling, taking a second to try to collect his thoughts and put into words what it is he wants to articulate. He’s not even a hundred percent sure what it *is* that he wants to say. The only thing he knows for certain is that he wants to try. He wants to try and help Nathan. Warren isn’t sure where this certainly came from, much less why he’s so definite about his decision, but his mind’s been made. He can barely wrap his head around how strange of a day it’s been and Warren’s not even sure Nathan feels anything close to what Warren is feeling. Which, simply put, is that the two are connected in this whole shit show. Nathan probably wouldn’t extend the same courtesy to Warren if the roles were reversed, but Warren supposes that doesn’t really matter. He’s not going to leave him behind. So after a deep breath, Warren starts again. “We’re not friends,” he repeats, “and I’m not saying we will be—I get that, I’m me, and you’re…” he flaunts his hands at Nathan in a slightly wild motion, “you know… *you* — but that doesn’t mean we can’t work together. If we stick it out, then I think we can make it. I just know I can’t do this alone.”

Nathan’s still looking ahead as Warren speaks, letting the exhale of smoke out in breaths to cloud around them. He has no idea if anything he’s saying is even being absorbed by Nathan or if he’s choosing to blatantly ignore him. There is a pull to say more, to try and convince him further, but he’s also afraid that he’ll just end up digging himself into a hole. It’s with a last ditch attempt and a swell of courage in his chest as he holds his breath that Warren offers a single question.

“Are you with me?”

There’s a long, existential pause that seems to last for an eternity between them. Until at last Nathan responds. “I’m with you.”

Chapter 4: with you

Chapter Notes

> Hi friends, so sorry it's been a while since the last update, but it is here at last! Thanks so much for over 500 hits, wow! not to mention 40 kudos and ya'll who commented on this!? I cannot express how much it means to me, so thank you to each and every one of you!!!
>
> Enjoy this chonk of a chapter!!
>
> Happy holidays!

"Really?!" I mean—okay," Warren pauses. "Great, that's good."

Somehow, it all seems too easy. The fact that Nathan has agreed. Warren can't get a proper read on the guy, but for the time being, Nathan remains and that's all Warren can ask for right now.

Warren barely notices how they both stare at each other until he's suddenly aware of how serious Nathan looks at the statement. Warren realizes something's off and quickly pinpoints it to that signature Nathan scowl, or lack of. He's not furrowing his brow like he always seems to be, instead his face is somewhat relaxed. There's something else, too. A shift, perhaps, in the way he holds himself as he stands beside Warren. Less bristled. His shoulders, which are usually hunched with tension, have eased up. It changes his overall appearance significantly. Or Warren's just reading into things, as he's prone to do. And then just as fast the moment's over, and Nathan's retreated his gaze forwards, bringing his cigarette back up to his lips.

The slow movement of his hands lull Warren, a wave of exhaustion washing over him. He stifles a yawn, the high from devising a plan in the diner steadily wearing off. He doesn't know how late it is, not being able to trust the time on his watch since coming to the past. But judging by the deep navy that has taken over the sky and a moon that hangs relatively high above their heads, he knows it's late.

Focusing on the end of Nathan's cigarette as it glows orange, Warren's eyelids begin to grow heavy. The prospect of crawling into his bed makes him almost hysterical, until he realizes he has no bed to go to. No dorm room waiting for him back at school. With a long groan, he agonizingly drags his hands over his face, "*Fuckkk."* Nathan peers over at him with a questioning look. "Dude! We can't go back to school. We don't have our dorm rooms anymore!"

“Fuck.” Nathan echos, except it’s not drawn out and whiney like Warren’s was. The two share a look of unease which gradually pans to Warren’s car parked just off in a spot behind them. “I call taking the backseat.”

“What!” Warren smothers another groan, “It’s my car!”

“You brought me here, remember?” Nathan smirks.

“You’re literally the worst.” Warren doesn’t wait before swivelling around and sulking defeatedly back to his car. Nathan, to his promise, follows a couple of steps behind. *I’m with you.* Again Warren is hit by the promise, a promise he knows probably doesn’t mean as much to Nathan as it does to him. Still, if anyone told him Nathan Prescott would be uttering those words to him, he wouldn't have believed them. *Or* the immense relief that came with them, yet here they are. Apparently on terms of sharing a car for the night.

Warren pulls open the passenger’s door to survey their sleeping quarters for the night, the little interior bulb illuminating their options. Which doesn’t look promising. The stretch of backseat is definitely preferable, leaving the only other makeshift bed a reclined passenger seat.

From beside where Warren stands, Nathan pops his head in the back, glancing around before turning to the side to look at Warren. “Make yourself at home, I guess,” Warren crawls in and shrugs off his backpack to plop into the driver’s seat, closing the passenger door behind him. He makes sure to press down the lock on the door as he does so. Nathan proceeds to climb inside the back and once he’s somewhat settled, begins to take off his jacket. It’s still wet, Warren realizes, making him wonder if Nathan had been slowly freezing to death since coming to the diner. “Here, you can put it with my bag if you want.”

Nathan hesitates, “I was going to use it to sleep under.”

Warren frowns, “dude, it’s still wet. Just use my hoodie.” He’s already grabbing for it to hand Nathan’s way, holding it out for him. Nathan looks down at it as if the sweater is the most offensive shade of blue he’s ever seen and that offering it to him is somehow the worst thing Warren could ever do. “*Oh my God*, take it. Sorry it’s not up to your fashion standards.”

“That’s not–” Nathan starts but is cut off when Warren shoves the mass of fabric in his face. It’s oddly satisfying, since it shuts him up and he gives in to taking it. “Thanks.” It comes out muffled from beneath the sweater as Nathan pulls it over his head. His dark blonde hair–all wavy now that it’s dry–is tousled from the action. Pieces fall into his face, somehow still looking like it was done on purpose as it frames his tired eyes.

Then they’re just staring at each other. Again. “Well,” Warren says, though it comes out more like a yelp, suddenly needing to fill the quiet. “Goodnight, then.” He turns out the car light, dousing the interior with darkness and settles into his bed. *Or, seat.*

Nathan doesn’t respond, but Warren can hear him shuffle into his own seat. They lie as flat as they can in their spots, positioned in a way so Nathan’s feet are just below where Warren’s headrest and makeshift pillow for the night hovers above. It’s uncomfortable, there’s no denying that. Warren can only hope he’s exhausted enough for it not to matter.

Apparently he had been, considering the next time Warren opens his eyes he's met with the indistinguishable stream of light from the rising sun through the window across from where he's curled up. He blinks a couple of times, squinting as he adjusts to how bright it is. Swivelling in his stiff position, he cranes his neck to look in the backseat to find Nathan absent.

A sense of panic swells in his chest and rises to his throat, bolting upright as his eyes dart around the small space. But before he can spiral any further, he spots the form of someone leaning against the hood of his car. Warren recognizes the blue of his hoodie and relaxes slightly, body hunching back against the seat. *He's still here.*

It's after the short burst of panic wears off that Warren notices just how sore he is. No doubt the result from spending the night sleeping in his car. He rubs the back of his neck in an attempt to ease some of the tension there before eventually tracking down his shoes to put on and join Nathan outside.

Exiting the car, Warren's met with the brisk morning air, taking note of how insulated the car had been overnight. He's impressed, giving his Chevy a little pat of approval. He then moves to stand beside Nathan, stretching his arms above his head while simultaneously yawning. His long sleeve shirt rises up, exposing his stomach to the harsh autumn breeze that rolls in. It instantly makes him curl back in on himself. He's tempted to fling himself back into the cozy comfort of his car. But they've got work to do. Warren knows these precious few days cannot be wasted, each minute detrimental to their plan. It's time to put his impeccable time management to use.

Neither of them say anything to each other, Warren having to restrain himself from saying something that can be considered too friendly. *We're not friends*, the statement they'd both shared echoes through his mind. He knows that. Warren *believes* that. So how come he feels slightly hurt by the fact? *That's a new development.* He tries his best not to ponder over the thought. After all, it doesn't mean anything. It *shouldn't* mean anything. Warren shifts his focus to the sound of the waves crashing on the beach in the distance. It's soothing, but also serves as a reminder to the icy wind that knocks into him and ruffles his hair about.

Warren eyes the sweater still worn by Nathan from the night before, not having the heart to ask for it back. He, too, looks shaken by the cold October morning air, arms crossed tightly around him and his hands buried within the sleeves of the hoodie. He's got a scowl on his face, but Warren has become familiar enough to know when they hold no animosity. This is, simply put, Nathan's resting bitch face. Nathan's eyes meet Warren's, eyebrows lowering in obvious confusion and Warren is quick to avert his attention. He's gotta learn to stop staring at the guy so much. Though, Warren is still having a hard time even fully digesting the fact that he went from avoiding Nathan to *this*. Whatever this is.

Something heavenly enters his nostril then, carried on by a breeze from the direction of the Two Whales, as if it is just now that Warren remembers parking in the diner's lot for the night. It renders Warren's mind blank with all but one thought. *Food.*

The great thing about staying overnight in a 24/7 diner parking lot? It raised no suspicion. But even better than that? They didn't have to go far for breakfast. At least now he has a perfectly reasonable way to break the silence.

“Want some pancakes?”

Five minutes later they’re back in their booth chowing down. It’s mostly uneventful compared to last night, and Warren finds out Nathan had just as uncomfortable of a sleep as he had. The thought of spending a few more nights holed up in Warren’s car is far from appealing, but he supposes it’s better than nothing. So all in all, he’s kind of thankful his car served as the vessel for his time machine mechanism that never should have been, as opposed to something far less practical.

With their hunger sated and their energy restored from a somewhat restful sleep combined with a couple cups of Two Whales’ famous coffee, they finally hop back into the car to head to the labs at Blackwell Academy. It’s a Saturday–which explains the barren state of the Two Whales parking lot that early in the morning–and Warren’s confident that the two of them won’t seem too suspicious in their endeavour to hijack one of the school labs for the next phase of their plan.

The campus is still populated by students enjoying the beginning of fall, but Warren’s sure the school building itself will be the opposite–if the weekends he’s spent working away on his own at the labs in the future are anything to go by. So the two proceed, making sure to collect the reactor which had been moved to Warren’s trunk the night prior.

“I got it,” Nathan holds out his hands to take it from Warren, who hesitates at the offer after digging it out from the trunk, thinking back to the last time Nathan had touched it. In his moment of indecision, Warren half expects Nathan to roll his eyes or perhaps even drop the offer completely, shoving his hands back into his pockets forcefully with a fresh scowl on his face. But he does neither. Instead, he flinches. He flinches when Warren pauses in handing it over. It all happens so quickly, and though Warren is more than justified in his hesitation, he feels shame. Nathan’s hands falter, but he still holds them up, “I won’t do anything to it…I swear.”

Taken aback, Warren proceeds to hand the reactor to Nathan wordlessly. Then Warren watches as he turns away and walks off. For a split second Warren worries he made the wrong decision in trusting it to him, but then Nathan’s back from a short trip to the passenger’s side of the car with his varsity jacket–now finally dry–draped over the top of Warren’s project. “For discretion,” Nathan explains.

“Smart,” Warren blinks, finding nothing more adequate to add. He’s surprised Nathan thought of the idea. Or moreso, he’s surprised Nathan is *thoughtful* enough to come up with the idea. The less attention they brought upon themselves, the better. That’s for sure.

So with things in motion, Warren makes sure to grab his backpack before they leave. The two manage to make their way through campus and into the main hall of the school without so much as a glance in their direction. They share a look of relief, though Warren knows they aren’t in the clear just yet. He goes ahead of Nathan to scope out the hallway leading to the science labs, rounding the corner with slight trepidation at the prospect of finding a 1980’s version of Ms. Grant ready to scold him for daring to trespass. But there’s no one, so Warren sends a thumbs up Nathan’s way.

Warren's newfound confidence is quickly extinguished after he bounds up to the science room and tries the door handle with no luck. He spins to face Nathan frantically, "shit, it's locked! What do we do now!?" From above the mound of red fabric draped over the reactor in his hands, Nathan frowns in thought, opening his mouth to answer. The sharp *click* of the door swinging open behind Warren stops whatever it is that Nathan was going to say and Warren doesn't have time to react when he turns around and immediately knocks into whoever it is that's exiting the room.

Books clatter to the floor, Warren's gaze falling with them. "Sorry! *OhmyGod,* sorry!" he sputters out, dropping to his knees to begin picking them back up. A few papers slipped from within one of the notebooks to scatter around them, making Warren feel even worse until he's reaching for one of the sheets and freezes, reading a name neatly printed in its top right corner. His eyes dart up to see a young girl who's crouched down across from Warren, mirroring his action of collecting books and papers where they've fallen. She wears a blue cardigan and has shoulder length brown hair, dark like her eyes underneath thick lashes. She's pretty, really pretty.

"Mom!?" Warren slaps a hand over his mouth. But it's too late. The girl–his *mom* –blinks up at him, eyebrows raising to sit high on her forehead in surprise. "I mean, uh…" Warren racks his brain for some sort of way to backtrack from the horrifying thing he'd just blurted out, coming up with absolutely nothing to rectify the result of his very clear, very *loud*, and very genuine shock at seeing what he believes to be the 17-year-old version of his own mother before him. *Nope. No coming back from that one.*

"How embarrassing," Warren tries again, straightening up. She follows with some delay. "You just *really* look like my mom. N-not that you look old! I meant, like, when my mom was in high school–super similar. I'm, uh, actually your cousin!" *Oh God, please make it stop.* "I moved here recently. And am going to your school now. First day." Nathan shifts at his side, and Warren latches onto the movement. "A-and, this is my friend! He moved here, too. Both our families! Just couldn't be apart," he lets out a shaky laugh. "We came up from, uh…"

Nathan doesn't even skip a beat, confidently stating in a voice that is way too calm, "Fort Lauderdale."

Warren's left giving an unacknowledged incredulous look Nathan's way before pulling his attention back to his mom, "Yes. Fort Lauderdale." Her eyebrows have lowered, though only slightly as she still hasn't offered a word in return. In his panicked state, and with what is quickly becoming some sort of stress induced habit, Warren goes for introducing the two, "Nathan, this is Louisa, my m–cousin. Louisa, this is Nathan."

"Lou," she corrects, "never Louisa."

A long, awkward pause grows between the three, filled only by the consistent eye contact amongst them all. *He knew that.* He *knows* everyone calls her Lou, not Louisa. He also knows–*shit.* "Okay that's a lie I'm actually your son." Warren blurts out, making it sound like one big word.

Lou presses her lips together, slowly blinking, “you just figured out that I don’t have any cousins, didn’t you–”

“–yes.”

Another beat passes, then Nathan buries his head into the varsity-jacket-covered reactor in his hands, “Jesus *fucking* Christ*,* Graham.”

Lou seems to react at that, frowning at Nathan’s comment and averts her gaze from him to begin studying Warren with a keen eye. She takes a step towards him, one arm closely clutching the recently collected books of hers while the other tentatively lifts with an outstretched finger to prod at Warren’s cheek. “Fascinating…”

“Yup,” Warren chuckles, though it sounds almost as if he’s choking from the strain. “We accidentally got launched back in time after getting struck by lightning and are trying desperately to go to the future—*our* present, but your future, I suppose.” He pauses, taking a second to ponder over his lack of self preservation. “I gotta say, I honestly have no idea why I’m telling you all this but at the same time if there’s anyone that could help us, it’s probably going to be the best physicist that I know. Which happens to be, uh… you.”

She’s stunned. Or at least, Warren assumes since she’s now petrified in place. He brings up a hand to rub at the back of his neck nervously, sharing a worried glance with Nathan. Then someone–a teacher perhaps–can be heard rounding the corner behind them. Their worried exchange quickly shifts to alarm and Lou jumps into action by ushering the two of them into the science lab with a hurried *‘get in, quick!’*

Stumbling inside, Lou swiftly closes the door behind them. They all wait for the footsteps to pass, Warren holding his breath until the sound fades. “Thanks,” he breathes out. Lou lets go of the doorknob she’d been grasping onto tightly, turning to press her back against the door.

“I still don’t understand… there’s no way–”

“I know,” Warren holds up a hand, “trust me, I know. I’m still struggling to wrap my own brain around it”

Lou shakes her head a little, “but *how*?”

Warren looks over at Nathan, and the two share a look of understanding before they move to one of the lab benches in unison. Warren clears off enough space for Nathan to place the covered reactor down. Lou’s inched closer, peering over their shoulders to see what it is they’re doing. Her expression of disbelief is now mixed with curiosity as Warren gestures over to it. “Because of this.” As if on cue, Nathan reaches to pull away his jacket and uncover the reactor which stands tall–if not a little charred–beneath. “I’ve somehow managed to make a real, working time machine.”

Lou glances at the reactor, then to Warren, then back to the reactor, then to Nathan where she lingers for a second, then landing on the reactor once more. “Right…” she finally comes up with.

Warren anticipates that she might try to make a run for it. To sprint away from them screaming bloody murder and sic the principal or security on them, saying that two crazy dudes who claim to not only be from the future, but that one of them is her future *son,* are trying to coerce her into fixing their "time machine", thus getting them arrested–his dreams of getting into Stanford perishing once again–and stranded in the past. *Now present?* Warren's brain hurts.

But instead of all that, Lou takes a step towards the reactor, throwing a cautious look Warren's way. "May I…?" The tension that consumes Warren's body bleeds out of his muscles, letting out a shaky breath of relief along with it.

"Yeah, please," he waves his hand to gesture her towards it. "I assume since it was smoking up a storm when first getting here that it's in no condition to take us home. Plus, I'm pretty sure some of the internal stuff has completely melted, judging by the, uh, burnt electrical smell."

Lou hums as Warren explains, thoroughly examining the outside of the machine. Warren and Nathan move closer, too, until they're all huddled around it. She then picks up a pencil that's lying on the table to prod at it, gradually using it to move the reactor around until it's turned 180 degrees. Both Nathan and Warren watch her intently and when she pops open the small door on the top, they all peer inside.

Warren's heart sinks when what he sees left of the inside proves him right. There's a collection of different coloured wires that have melded into one giant mass from fusing together. *That's going to be a pain in the ass.*

Along with the complete destruction of the wiring, the interior walls of the reactor look in poor condition with its equally singed appearance. Admittedly, all the components that comprised of the device were in dire need of replacement. To put it simply, they basically needed to remake the time machine from scratch. *Now that's* realllly *going to be a pain in the ass*.

Warren slumps against the countertop. He's unmotivated, to say the least. The prospect of building a whole new reactor is not something he feels confident about. It had taken him a solid week and a half to put the thing together in Ms. Grant's class, not taking into account all the theorizing that went into it prior to the physical construction of the thing. But when he turns his defeated gaze to Lou, he sees her tapping the pencil in her hand against her chin thoughtfully.

"Do you have your notes?" She points the question at Warren.

He blinks, then stumbles to unloop his bag from his shoulders and extract his notebook from within. "Y-yeah, of course! Everything I wrote on it is in here," he holds it out for her and she gingerly takes it from his extended hand.

She flips through it, face set in determination as she does so, "let's get to it, then."

It takes some time to get the ball rolling, Lou mostly preoccupied with going through Warren's notebook for the first while. In that time Warren and Nathan stand by the reactor

while Lou idly paces the length of the lab absorbing Warren's notes. Seeing her do so makes him slightly self conscious about the state of his writing and erratic note taking and yet above all else the image itself is *bizarre* beyond belief. It is at this point that it really hits him that the person in front of him is his mom. *That's his mom.*

"*Heyyy*, earth to Graham. You good?" Nathan's waving a hand in front of Warren's face, his usual crudeness seeping into his words, though his voice is lowered considerably so it's just between the two of them.

"Oh–yeah…I'm good. This is just… really fucking weird…" he trails off. Now he knows what Nathan must've felt like seeing his dad the day before. Or maybe he doesn't. Considering his mom isn't a piece of shit like Nathan's dad is. He flinches at that thought, *yeesh, that's a little harsh.* But it's still a jarring experience, to say the least.

"Yeah. Really fucking weird," Nathan echoes as the two continue watching Lou walk back and forth before them. Warren can sense Nathan shift beside him after another minute or so passes. "It's really weird being in the 80s. And by really weird, I mean extremely fucked up. But it's also kinda…"

Warren peers over at him. "...Cool?" he offers. Because if truth be told, aside from the initial shock and being overwhelmed by their situation, walking around in an 80s version of Arcadia Bay was kind've really… *tubular.*

Nathan lets out a huff, and Warren swears he can almost make out the ghost of a smirk on his lips. One that's quickly hidden as he wipes a hand over his mouth. "Cool. Yeah, it's kinda cool to see."

That's something Warren definitely didn't expect to hear from Nathan.

"Alright." Both boys' attention return to Lou, who's ceased her pacing and stands facing them now. "I think we can salvage this."

Warren and Lou immediately begin working by deconstructing the reactor, but not before equipping themselves with the proper tools and protection. All the while they exchange a bunch of scientific jargon, throwing ideas back and forth. He's sure it goes over Nathan's head, who lingers at a distance. He continues to give them space for the entirety of the time they spend working on the reactor. The endless conversation Warren has with his mom gradually moves into more casual territory–nothing like talking cult classic 80s films *during* the 80s–mixed with discussing the project at hand. It's nice, and Warren finds himself relaxing enough to actually have fun, feeling totally in his element.

Hours pass, unbeknownst to Warren. And at one point Nathan flickers the lightswitch of the overhanging bulb he and Lou work underneath to get their attention. "I'm hungry." Warren blinks up at Nathan's bored expression, having declared the statement in a monotone fashion. Warren suddenly tunes into his own hunger, which he hadn't even noticed. He casts a glance at the analog clock at the front of the class, reading an exact quarter past 8 PM.

"Holy crap!" Warren exclaims, realizing that what felt like an hour or so of work had actually translated into their entire morning, afternoon, and is now ticking past the borderline

of their evening spent working on the reactor.

"*Ya*, I literally took a nap while you guys were tinkering away. My phone died like 2 hours in." Nathan's moved to sit atop one of the lab benches now, and Warren tries not to be stressed out over how unsanitary that probably is.

He looks at his side to where Lou stands, projecting a confused look at Nathan. "I'm actually pretty hungry, too," he admits. She returns her attention to Warren, face morphing to one tinged with humour. "What?"

"I was going to say that I'm not your mom and to get your own food, but I forgot you guys are stranded here. And that I am, in fact, your mom. Apparently." She frowns at that. Probably weirded out by voicing the strange yet true statement aloud. Then she's turning away to dig into her bag on the lab chair closest to her, pulling out a set of car keys. "You guys like Thai food? There's a pretty good place down the street from school." She waggles her keys in front of Warren's face, "if your friend doesn't mind taking my car to pick it up?"

"My…?" Warren doesn't automatically clock that she's talking about Nathan. "Oh, right– yeah. My friend. Nathan."

Lou hesitates, "he does know how to drive, right?"

Suddenly appearing beside them, and giving them a scowl each, Nathan snatches the keys from Lou's still outstretched hand. "Of course I know how to drive. So what do you nerds want?"

Departing a minute later with a scribbled out list of their orders and some money courtesy of Lou, Nathan leaves the two of them to grab the food. It should only take him around half an hour, yet Warren is overcome with an impatience at his return. And it's not from the hunger that he's become acutely aware of since. It's the fact that him and Lou are now alone, which is stupid considering it has pretty much only been the two of them even while Nathan was still here. But it was easier when he hadn't been so hyper-aware of that fact.

"Thanks for covering dinner, by the way. And offering your car. That's super nice of you, since we just kinda barged in and demanded your help." He takes a seat on a stool beside Lou, who's jotting down a new list of materials they'll need for reconstruction of the reactor.

"No problem," she sends him a smile and Warren latches onto how eerily familiar it looks, trying his best not to show how weirded out he feels from it. "So your friend, not much of a science buff I take it?"

"Nathan? Nahh," Warren can't think of a single instance where he's ever even seen Nathan in the science labs before. Not that they were in the same classes, but Warren spent enough time at the labs to know.

"More of a jock, then."

Warren chuckles, "the jacket give it away?" The same jacket that now sits on one of the lab benches after Nathan had balled it into a makeshift pillow at some point while they had been

busy. Warren shrugs, “not too big into sports either, I’d say.” From the couple of games Warren had been dragged to by his small friend group, Nathan had either not been there, or benched for the entirety of the game. Something told him Nathan has no interest in being an active member of the football team. “He’s actually interested in photography. This is probably the longest I’ve seen him without a camera.” It was true. Though Warren rarely paid Nathan any attention before time travelling together, he knew of his photography. Max had spoken about his style. Unnerving, yet intense and quite captivating were the terms she’d used to describe it.

“Ah, the suffering artist type,” Lou nods her head in exaggerated understanding. “What’s his style like?”

“Monochrome, mostly. Like, black and white.” Max had told him that, too. How, “his photos are deeply contrasted in more than just harsh lighting.” He thinks for a moment, “I don’t know how much studio photography he does, but he always has his camera slung across him.” Just like Max. He wonders if under different circumstances the two might have been friends. If there was an alternate reality out there where they shared a friend group.

Warren thinks back to the early days of the school year, his very *first* year at Blackwell. He’d seen Nathan pretty regularly at the start of September, passing him in the halls before and between classes, seeing him leisurely around the dorms, always wielding his film camera whether with his jock friends or strutting alongside Victoria Chase. Come to think of it, pretty much after a week into the first month Warren had stopped seeing him altogether. All but a ghost to the campus and dormitories. Even with his room adjacent from Warren’s.

The next time he’d seen Nathan was in the hallway the day of the storm. He hadn’t even had his camera with him then.

“Your watch is broken.”

“Huh?” Warren blinks, noticing how Lou examines his wrist. “Right, yeah. I think it got fucked after being launched here.”

Lou hums in contemplation, “I don’t think I can fix it, I’ve never seen one like that before.”

Warren screws his face into a frown, looking down at his watch. He didn’t have the chance to ponder over it, but now that he does, he’s pretty bummed. It was one of those calculator ones, super cool and the same one he’d been eyeing at the most recent tech expo he’d gone to. A birthday gift he’s especially fond of and given to him by, well. His mom. He hopes once he gets back there will be a way to fix it.

“I’m sure I have a spare one back at my dorm that I can lend you, if you’d like? Not as suave as this one but I’m sure it’ll do.”

“That would be great, thank you,” Warren’s a little taken aback, hoping his thanks doesn’t lack the overwhelming gratitude that he holds over her offer. He knew his mom was one of the kindest people in the world, but *damn*. Warren doesn’t know if he’d be this chill if the roles were reversed.

Soon after their talk, the jiggling of the door handle signals Nathan's return. As well as: *food.* Which, at this point, Warren has become quite ravenous for. They chow down almost in silence from how hungry they are and once they've finished it's safe to say Warren is full and ready to pass out. Though, with his increasing exhaustion comes the familiar dread of their poor sleeping predicament.

As if on the same wavelength, Nathan lets out a groan from beside him. "I do *not* want to spend another night in your beat-down car."

"Hey," Warren shoots a frown Nathan's way. "She's treated us well, we'd have no other option if it wasn't for her." The pain in his back protests at his defence, making him sigh. "But yeah… it's definitely not ideal."

"You two have been sleeping in a car?" Lou's concern is both evident in her expression and voice when she points the question at the two of them.

Warren does a half shrug, a bit of shame in the movement as if he were admitting it to a worrying parent. Which, she kind've is. "Only one night so far…"

"Well," Lou straightens up from where she'd been leaning on the lab counter, her composure shifting as she threads her arms back into her cardigan that she'd shed some time while working on the reactor. "No way am I letting you guys do that for another night. You'll stay in my room." She's adopted a stern tone that is all too reminiscent of her future self. A tone he knows is useless to argue against.

Warren shares a look with Nathan, seeing the same surprise reflected there. "I–are you sure?" He's looking back at Lou, who has conjured up a white sheet of sorts to cover the time machine, clear that she's more than made up her mind.

"I'm certain. I mostly stay at Harry's, anyway, so it's usually empty."

For a second Warren is stunned at the mention of his dad's name. He blinks, trying to pretend he's not as affected as he actually is. *His dad's here, too. A younger version of his dad. Just living his teenage life alongside his mom. Weird.*

"You just gunna stare at her like an idiot or do you think you could accept her offer so we don't have to spend another night in that heap of junk you call a car?" Nathan bumps Warren's shoulder, drawing his attention back to the present. Well, the *current* present.

"Uh, y-yeah, I mean, yes! That would actually be really great."

"Let's go then," Lou's holding out the covered-up reactor, but as Warren raises his arms to accept it, Nathan swoops in to scoop it from her hands.

"I'll take this, you grab my jacket," He nods in the direction of where it's still balled up on the lab bench. "You'll probably need it."

Warren's dumbstruck, arms still raised in front of him like a fool at the statement like he's short-circuited again. "R-right." He quickly drops his arms. "Thanks." He's hurrying to grab

his stuff and Nathan's jacket, putting it on and trying his best not to read into the gesture. It's just Nathan's jacket *that Nathan never takes off.* He totally only offered it because he's still wearing Warren's sweater *that he's been acutely aware of the entire day.*

It's weighty, and a surprisingly nice material. It's cool. As in, it *looks* cool. At least, it's always looked cool on Nathan. Warren vaguely wonders if he looks half as cool in it himself. *Probably not.*

"You coming, nerd?"

"Yup!" Warren yelps out, almost jumping out of his skin. He grabs his backpack and heads towards the silhouette of Nathan in the doorframe after he's turned off the light. Thankful for how it cloaks him in darkness to hide his embarrassment.

Fifteen minutes later, the three ascend the stairs to the dorms. The hazy exhaustion that had hit Warren after dinner and the hours of their hard work is promptly replaced by the chill of night and the exciting prospect of sneaking into the girls' dormitories.

Ew, he thinks to himself. *That just makes him seem creepy.* But there's something exhilarating about it. Like some sort of high school cliche seen in those coming-of-age movies. The ones where there is always a trio getting up to no good. And Warren has to admit to himself, he's actually having fun in the process alongside Nathan and Lou. Warren had never really thought himself the type to partake in such things, even if he'd indulged in a similar daydream once or twice. Though, certainly never picturing it with the company he currently has.

As a contrast, he's almost positive Nathan's done this sort of thing before. Sneaking into the girls' dorms. Warren's thrill lessens somewhat at the thought of it. The image of Nathan climbing through one of the windows, stumbling inside to meet up with a girl late into the night. *Their hands all over each other, his jacket draped across her shoulders…*

The same Jacket that's now slung on Warren's very own frame. He feels a blush creep up into his cheeks at the unintentional parallel of that thought. There's an uneasiness that settles in the pit of his stomach now, replacing the excitement momentarily. The grin he'd had on his face since arriving outside of Lou's room falters, too. He doesn't want to picture any more of this scenario he's created in his head.

Trying to think of something else, *anything else,* Warren focuses his attention on Lou as she turns the key to her room. She swings open the door, waving them inside. She follows, careful when closing it behind them and automatically moves to flick on the lamp on her dresser.

The room is immediately illuminated in a soft glow. Warren takes note of the abundance of books. And he's not using the term lightly. There are, like, *a lot* of books. Equal in both novels and textbooks. They scatter across almost every surface, some even being piled on the floor. Her bed isn't made and for a brief moment, Warren is overcome with the unjust treatment he receives at his own room being a mess at their house. At least now he knows where he gets it from.

“Make yourselves at home,” Lou holds out a hand to gesture to the space. “Oh! Let me grab you that watch.” She begins rummaging around in her desk and Warren takes the opportunity to busy himself with finding a free corner of the room to put his backpack down in. “This should treat you well enough,” Lou holds out a worn, brown leather watch for him.

Warren gingerly takes it from her, fastening it around his wrist. “This is perfect! It’ll be pretty crucial for going back.” While working on the reactor together he’d informed Lou of their whole plan. The scheduled lighting strike time and location being their ticket to going home. He’d mostly wanted her insight, but also hoped she might help them in their endeavour, which she’d offered almost instantaneously.

“I thought so, too,” she smiles. “I guess I’ll leave you guys to settle in, I should really be heading out.”

“Whoa, wait, *alone!?*” Warren’s shaking his head, “no way. We’ll walk you, the 80s are like, *super* notorious for serial killers!”

Lou laughs at that, “I’m pretty sure if I’d got murdered you’d already know about it. But… I would feel a lot better being accompanied to my car, regardless.”

So they do just that. And Warren takes a certain comfort in him and Nathan walking Lou to her car on the other side of campus. Once they’ve made it, she leaves Warren with the key to the dorm and a promise to be back the following morning before they say their goodbyes for the night.

They watch her drive off and Warren waits until the taillights of her car disappear before spinning around to face Nathan. He stands a few feet off, shuffling on his feet awkwardly with his hands buried deep within the pockets of Warren’s sweater in a way that Warren himself mirrors in Nathan’s jacket.

Warren lets out a breath full of a tension he hadn’t realized he’s holding onto. Tension that now seeps through to his fingertips as he shakes out his hands in front of him.

The nerves jolting through his body turns into a building excitement as the crazy day they’d had finally sinks in. He just met his *mom*. Met, and *hung out with*. Alongside *Nathan Prescott.*

If Max could see him now.

It’s exhilarating, the thought of having worked with his mom at a time where she was the same age as him. Warren had *fun*. And he can’t wait to do it all again tomorrow.

He takes in a deep breath now through his nostrils. There is something in the air that night, other than its chilling crispness, that has Warren–for lack of a better term–*giddy.*

“So…” Warren breathes out.

“So.” Nathan echos.

Flashing a smile Nathan's way, Warren is surprised to find it's not met with its usual hostility. Nathan still rolls his eyes, but the corners of his mouth twist up. It's enough to make Warren gawk at the gesture, which he's sure to wipe off his face with a sleeve-covered hand in haste.

Then he feels the urge to start running off at the mouth, like Warren's prone to doing. It bubbles up to his throat, threatening to spill forth. But he holds his tongue. *We're not friends.*

The words Nathan threw at him only the previous night peirce his thoughts. Full of so much spite and resentment that they sting even now at their recollection. Better to leave things unsaid, Warren supposes. And yet he can't help but be a little bummed. The whole time he'd been interacting with his mom he'd subconsciously been noting all the things he'd wanted to recite and discuss with Nathan afterwards. Unknowingly, Warren was looking *forward* to telling Nathan all his thoughts. Imagining, too, how they'd get carried away over it all.

The brief moment the two of them shared in the Two Whales diner freaking out over witnessing a young Joyce for the first time flashes in his mind. Eyes blown wide in disbelief, yet also the moment they began to truly believe. Snuffed out just as fast as it happened. *We're not friends. So don't act like it.* Warren might've scoffed at the idea once. Hell, he's pretty sure he has.

And now? *So don't act like it.* He never thought it'd be so difficult.

So it's with a stride-stopping, breath-hitching bewilderment that overtakes Warren when Nathan is the one who decides to initiate the conversation further. "That went well." Warren's neck snaps up, not being able to tell if Nathan's being sarcastic. Narrowing his eyes, Warren analyzes Nathan's expression to determine that he must be egging him on. To coax him into having a full-blown Warren-ramble in an attempt to no doubt ridicule him–or worse–bring about an incentive to have another argument because the two of them are, and will remain, *the furthest thing from friends and anything that might ever lead to*.

And yet, instead of all that, Warren is faced with a blank stare that he's unable to read. And then Nathan shrugs in a way that Warren can only describe as… casual. Nathan Prescott. Acting casual. *Unheard of.* "Seriously, your mom's actually pretty cool."

Warren's left blinking his eyes owlishly, waiting for his brain to catch up and respond in a cohesive and timely manner. "...I…uh–yeah, uh–yes."

Nailed it.

"And a genius, too," Nathan continues. "I think she'll actually be able to help you get back."

"*Right!?"* Warren's excitement creeps back up and he can't help expressing his agreement with increasing enthusiasm. "She *is* cool, and super smart. I have no doubt she can help us! Plus, we actually get to sleep in a real bed thanks to her!"

"Not to mention she's smokin' hot," Nathan chimes in matter of factly. Warren nearly chokes at the comment. No–he actually *does* choke, trying–and failing–to recover when he sends Nathan what could only be described as a look of utter horror. Nathan side-eyes him, a sly

grin creeping across his face. “I’m fucking with you. Totally worth it for that reaction though.”

They begin making their way back towards the dorm, though they do so leisurely at a pace that drags out as their conversation flows. It’s mostly Warren who rambles away at Nathan. And he wonders if he’s even really listening to him. But each time he looks over, he finds his full attention directed at Warren. Their eyes that meet momentarily before Warren breaks away as he continues talking, telling himself he’s only doing so to make sure Nathan’s still present in the conversation. But in truth, Warren finds the connection too intimidating. Or, perhaps that’s not the right term to describe what it is that he’s feeling. Perhaps it’s all a bit too intimate for him.

How they stare hollowed and half-lidded, unwavering as they span across Warren’s face in a way that makes Warren feel more than just heard, but *seen,* too. The striking blue he is so used to perceiving looks darker in this lighting. The overhanging beams of street lights the only source of illumination for their walk back. It casts sharp shadows across Nathan’s face, carving out his cheekbones in a way he hasn’t witnessed them before. His eyes almost look like a different colour altogether, pupils so dilated that they absorb almost all the surrounding blue.

And that’s when Warren realizes just how *normal* Nathan looks. There’s no scrutiny twisting his face, no consistently furrowed brow that hardens his gaze and makes him look like… well, like *Nathan.* No, this is a different Nathan. And maybe that’s the reason Warren breaks the contact so quickly each time.

All the while he still focuses on the conversation at hand. Or, Warren supposes it’s more akin to a lecture at this point seeing as he doesn't give pause for Nathan to respond to any of what he is saying.

“–and you know Trevor, right? That’s who I thought it was, but turns out nope! That was before I realized what was going on. Lou mentioned the dude’s name is actually Argyle. Surprisingly wise guy–but now I'm *convinced* he must be related to Trevor somehow.” Warren gasps for air, not having realized how out of breath he is from simultaneously walking and talking. *Jeez, am I out of shape or do I need to learn to shut the fuck up?*

“Anyways,” Warren continues. “I guess I’ll have to ask him when we get back.”

“Yeah. Guess so.”

After a short pause, Warren presses his lips together, suddenly acutely self aware. “Sorry– I’m, ah, rambling. About stupid shit.” It takes him a few steps to realize Nathan’s not beside him anymore.

“Why do you always do that.” Nathan’s stopped and Warren halts, too, turning to look at him with evident confusion. “Apologize. Demean yourself,” Nathan clarifies.

Warren blinks,” I–I don’t know. I guess I just have a tendency to run off at the mouth, and I know it can… I guess, be annoying.”

“It is annoying,” Nathan confirms flatly. “But you don’t have to say you’re sorry all the time. And the stuff you’re saying isn’t stupid. It’s important. It’s important to you.”

Nathan picks up his pace again, leaving Warren behind as if he hadn’t just dropped some insane bomb of sincere advice that Warren immediately takes to heart. “Oh.” he’s jogging to catch up after his moment of internalization, so caught up in the sentiment that he only manages a pathetic sounding, “right. Thanks.”

A silence stretches out between them, and though it’s no longer really as awkward as it once used to be, Warren still finds he wants to fill it. He glances over at Nathan, who looks ahead with an unreadable expression that Warren interprets most closely to that of boredom, if a bit tired. His gaze travels down to examine the sweater he still wears, retreating to look at his own arms still buried within the sleeves of Nathan’s varsity jacket and wondering if it’s become a permanent trade.

“*Sooooo,*” Warren draws out. “You play football.” It isn’t really a question, he’s well aware of Nathan and the football jocks, but it’s one way to fill the silence. And to his surprise, Nathan reacts in a way he least expects. He laughs. It’s breathy, and probably the result of his own surprise at Warren’s sudden choice of topic, but it’s a laugh nonetheless, and somehow it gives Warren the sensation of butterflies in his chest in a way he’d never experienced before.

“I’m on the team, sure.”

“I’ve never actually seen you do it. I can’t really picture you doing it, either. Playing on the team and stuff. No offence.” After a slight pause, Warren adds, “Go Bigfoots, I guess.”

A beat passes, then they both start laughing. It’s to the point where Warren has to wipe tears from his eyes. It wasn’t funny, it was just stupid. But the high from that night could’ve made anything funny.

“Yeah, it’s not really for me. It’s mostly a family thing, I suppose. You just kinda do what they expect you to do, I never really gave it much thought.”

“That…sucks,” Warren blurts out. *Wow. eloquently put, Warren.*

Nathan shrugs, “It’s kind of a drag. When your dad forces you into all the extracurricular shit he can find, it kinda takes all the fun out of it. Then it just becomes upholding the family name.” He momentarily looks up, tilting his head thoughtfully, “though, I didn’t mind theatre.”

Warren balks at that, “you did *theatre!?”*

“Oh yeah,” Nathan says dryly. “You’re looking at an esteemed cast member of Blackwell’s 2010 rendition of *The Tempest*.”

“No fucking way. Who’d you play?”

“Caliban.”

Warren gives Nathan a once over, nodding slightly, “I can see that.”

“Fuck you.” Nathan brings up a hand to push Warren’s shoulder, though it lacks any real force. “But even that lost its appeal when my dad got involved. The man knows how to ruin pretty much anything related to this goddamn school. So, no, *dad*, football isn’t my passion,” He shoots a smirk Warren's way, which is quick to slip from his face. “I’d rather be doing literally anything else.”

“Like your photography?”

Nathan noticeably stiffens at that. It takes him a while to respond, as if he’d been transported away at its mention. “I haven’t shot my own stuff in what feels like forever…”

Nathan shoves his hands in his pockets, not elaborating any further. Warren doesn’t really understand, since the only thing he actually knew about Nathan prior to everything is that he enjoys photography. But he doesn’t push, opting to shrug it off.

The dormitories come into view as they round the pathway they’d taken through the main campus, attempting to be as discreet as possible when finding their way back to Lou’s vacant room. It’s safe to say that once they finally make it inside and close the door Warren’s exhaustion has reached its peak. The adrenaline and excitement sufficiently worn off now that their night is coming to a close.

Warren changes into a pair of baggy pyjama pants and an oversized worn *Grease* t-shirt that Lou had left behind for him, alongside another set for Nathan, who Warren waits for after having left to change in the washroom. His feet practically drag on the floor at this point in anticipation of sleep. But he only makes it a couple of steps across the small space before he stops dead in his tracks.

Warren reels on Nathan just as he reenters the room, “we have a problem.”

“Yeah we do,” Nathan scoffs, attention lowering to Warren’s shirt. “Why am I stuck with Star Trek when you got Grease?”

“What–? No, not that. And yours is Star Wars, not Star Trek.”

“Whatever, nerd.”

“I’m talking about the fact that there’s only one bed?” Warren steps aside to gesture at the single twin. The same twin bed that he’s all too familiar with having in his own dorm room. A small, little detail he’d completely forgotten about until now.

Nathan leans to the side to look at it, then back to Warren, “...okay?”

“It doesn’t bother you that we only have that devastatingly tiny twin bed?”

“You’re more than welcome to sleep on the floor.”

“I’m not–” Warren frowns, “you don’t think that’s weird? That we’re going to be all up in each other?”

Nathan narrows his eyes, “well, now you’re making it weird.”

“No! I mean–it’s just gunna be cramped, that’s all–”

“Just shut up and get in.”

“Right. Okay.” Warren shuts up and awkwardly waits as Nathan throws back the covers, climbing in after him a second later. *I’m just sharing a bed. With Nathan Prescott. Nothing weird about that. Nope.*

And it…surprisingly isn't. Once the two shuffle themselves into comfortable enough positions it’s really not that bad. They lie back to back, and Warren doesn’t even notice he’s there. So tired that he doesn’t have the capacity to internally rack over the situation. And soon after his head hits the pillow he’s already drifting off. He’s almost gone, too, until–

“Warren?”

Warren’s eyelids flutter open, taken aback by the sudden disruption in silence. But even more so than that is the soft way Nathan speaks his name. He’s never heard such uncertainty in his voice. He almost believes he imagined it. Almost. “…yeah?”

“Why are you helping me?”

Warren frowns, unknowingly to Nathan. He has nothing but the darkness of the room to stare into. Pitch black, leaving only his mind to picture how Nathan looks when he poses the question. His voice shaking and at an octave Warren isn’t used to hearing from him “I already told you—“

“It doesn't make sense. The things I’ve said to you. The things I’ve done to you. Like that day in the parking lot.”

Warren holds his breath. “Yeah. That was pretty shitty. You were kind’ve a dick.”

There’s a dry laugh from Nathan that lacks any real humour, “kind've?”

“Okay. More than kind've. The way you hurt me, and Max… honestly I more than kind’ve hated you. You’re fucking mean and scary. I mostly avoided you around school cause, well. The one time I didn’t I ended up with an almost broken nose.” It was true, Warren’s well aware of his feelings for Nathan before all this started. He had really despised him–a fact that never really bothered Warren before.

And Nathan *was* scary. What happened in the parking lot isn’t something Warren’s going to forget anytime soon. And yet… in a way he had. When getting launched through time together he didn’t think twice about approaching Nathan. Sure, most of that decision was likely dictated by an adrenaline-induced bravery *slash* panic at the fact that Warren had been afraid he’d accidentally killed the guy, but the moment they’d stepped foot in an alternate time–far from the Blackwell they knew–Nathan was different.

He was still frantic, all over the place, and downright *mean*, though it all lacked its usual bite in comparison to the Nathan from the parking lot he’d witnessed with Max. It was almost…a muted version. Lessened, if only slightly. He still had his moments, like in the diner after

Warren insisted on working together. The anger that flashes so suddenly, without any warning. Some of his agitated and frantic nature lingering, too. The occasional glances around them when they're in public and how he fidgets incessantly while getting worked up.

But there are other things. New things. Signs of an easy-going Nathan beneath it all. It's buried deep, but if tonight proved anything, it's that Nathan is human. There is a person there. One that's flawed. Flawed to an extent that Warren is starting to realize is way deeper than the surface level he's always assumed.

Assumptions. Of who Nathan is. Warren doesn't know if he's more confused than ever, or finally starting to see some of the pieces that make up Nathan fall into place.

Warren breathes out slowly into the silence that's built up between them again. He musters the courage to continue, voicing what it is that he wants to say. What he thinks he's right about, but doesn't know for certain. "But… maybe… all of that, all of what you do… doesn't come from nowhere. That there's a reason behind your… I don't know…" *That maybe you're hurting, too.* Warren doesn't speak aloud his last thought. He's hesitant to take it too far, even though Nathan initiated the conversation in the first place.

In his admittance–and the following absence of a response–Warren's heart rate picks up in anticipation. A minute passes. Then two. Then Warren loses count. And in the expansion of quiet, he thinks Nathan might have fallen asleep. But then Nathan whispers something. It's so softly uttered that Warren can't quite make out the words. Nathan shifts beside him. And he knows. Warren knows without seeing him that he's uncomfortable with his own confrontation. That he regrets it.

Warren doesn't know what to make of it all. He tries to repeat the conversation in his head amidst the battle against exhaustion that threatens to completely consume him. He manages to hold onto consciousness long enough to discover what it is that Nathan had said. And how it didn't make sense at first, until Warren realizes Nathan had been talking to himself. About himself. Simply stating what Warren had been reiterating the whole time himself.

Destructive qualities.

Chapter 5: destructive qualities

Chapter Notes

come back besties, new chap just dropped.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you even listening, Nathan?"

Huh?

A camera flash lights up the pitch black room momentarily. Nathan squints his eyes, both in confusion and disorientation. *Where is he? Where's Warren?*

Another flash, and this time Nathan takes in the stark image of the darkroom. Jefferson's darkroom. *His darkroom*.

He's suddenly petrified in place, his gut twisting as unease settles across his skin, making it prickle, making it numb.

No.

He feels sick.

Nonononononono.

The blinding light signals another snapshot and his eyes dart around frantically. Trying to take in as much as he can. As much as he doesn't want to. He can't stop himself. Black and white and sterile. That's how he remembers it.

"Nathan, *Jesus Christ.* Pay attention! Am I wasting my time here? Do you know how valuable what I am trying to teach you is?"

His voice… it sends a chill like a sharp blade along his spine. *He doesn't want to be here. He wants to go back. He wants to wake up.* A sudden dread like lead fills his stomach at the realization, *is this even a dream?*

White light, another flash. And another. Nathan stumbles back, but someone grabs onto his arm with a grip like a vice and pulls him forward. " *Heyheyhey*, you're not going all psychotic on me, are you Nate? I told you only I can help you with that." Nathan can see him, he leers over him mere inches above him, bringing up a white gloved hand to pat Nathan's cheek harshly and forcing Nathan to look up at his face. The stark light of the camera flash reflects on his glasses, hiding his eyes behind them.

There's a noise that sounds like a whimper echoing off the hard walls. He almost mistakes it for his own. It isn't. It isn't his. The blood that's rushing in his ears fades to leave nothing but the quiet. And that noise. That awful noise.

She's here. He knows she's here.

rachelinthedarkroomrachelinthedarkroomrachelinthedarkroomrachelinthedarkroom.

His hands begin to shake like they did when he scribbled those words over and over again. Going through his mind on repeat. He thinks he's going to black out, *hopes* he might. Just to make it all go away.

Then someone grips his shoulder, but it's not as rough, and Nathan jolts awake.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Nathan's vision is filled with light. Not harsh like a moment ago. Soft sunlight. And Warren's there, taking up the entirety of what he can see. His brows creased in concern and eyes so wide that Nathan can see everything that's reflected inside of them. He's gripping both his shoulders, tightly, and holding Nathan in such close proximity that he could feel his breath when he spoke.

They're still in bed. Lou's bed. Lou's room. *In 1983.* He lets out a shaky breath filled with relief. He notes how in his state of alarm, he'd reached out to hold onto Warren, too, and promptly drops his hands from either side of his arms. But Warren doesn't let up, and somehow after Nathan's recovered somewhat–and he knows it was just a dream–he's surprised at how the contact and concern doesn't send a spike of irritation through him like it usually does.

"Yeah. I'm fine now."

"You're all sweaty." Warren finally lets go, though it's with clear hesitation. "You looked like a deer in the headlights for a second there."

"I had a nightmare."

"I'd say. You sure you're okay?"

Nathan nods his head, peeling himself from the sheets and out of the bed to walk on shaky legs towards the door. "I just need a minute." He doesn't wait for a response, or even look back over his shoulder. His feet drag along the carpeted hallway, carrying him to the washroom. Once he's inside he aims himself towards the sink, aware of how his feet pad across the grimy floor tiles. He *is* sweaty, shirt clinging to his chest and pants sticking to his legs uncomfortably.

He turns the tap, collecting the cold water in his hands to splash onto his face. It sends a shiver down his body, but it helps clear his mind. If only slightly. He can still see the flash of the camera when he closes his eyes. Lighting up Jefferson's face. Then Rachel's. He rubs at

them, pressing his fingers into the hollow space so roughly to the point where he begins to see stars.

He can't reach him here.

There's a lightness that comes with knowing that, like a heavy weight that's been lifted from his chest. He takes in a deep breath, one he imagines expanding his ribs, counting to three before exhaling out of his mouth. He opens his eyes but doesn't have it in him to meet his reflection. Too afraid he might throw his fist to collide there and send a thousand different versions of himself to collide with the floor, all noise and jagged edges. So he turns his back on the mirror, raising a still wet hand to run through his hair.

It seems that even being transported to a different time didn't stop his nightmares from following him. But at least he can wake up, something that didn't seem possible in the future reality he'd been living. Here he could escape.

Nathan drags a hand over his face, fingers grazing across the still raised lines where Max had scratched him. It doesn't feel as sensitive as before, but he's still surprised by them, serving as a reminder to what happened. And to what Warren had said to him last night.

Yeah. You're a shitty person. Nathan doesn't need to turn around and point at his reflection while yelling the thought for him to believe it. *What's changed?*

Nothing. Nothing's changed.

-

He's back in Lou's room a few minutes later, closing the door behind him. Warren's moved only slightly from his position on the bed to sit at the end of it, his legs dangling off the edge and staring expectantly at Nathan.

Nathan doesn't say anything, and he can tell Warren's trying really hard not to, either. The way he chews at his bottom lip in a nervousness that Nathan's picked up on early in their acquaintance with one another. It's something Warren does when he wants to say something really badly, but also doesn't want to overstep like he almost always does.

"You knew Rachel."

Nathan tenses up instantly. He was prepared for Warren to lose his internal battle, but he certainly wasn't expecting those to be the words that slip from his mouth. Nathan briefly wonders if he's still stuck in a dream. That the flesh will melt from Warren's face to morph into that of Jefferson's. Following him here so he can haunt Nathan further. But it doesn't happen. Warren remains with his wide eyed gaze directed up at him. Open and somehow so intimidating that Nathan has to look away.

"You kept repeating her name in your sleep. During your nightmare."

“No I wasn’t.” Nathan quickly retorts. Warren doesn’t argue, but he presses his lips together in a way that tells Nathan he’s not convinced. At each side, Nathan’s hands begin to shake. He instinctively balls them into fists, bringing them up to hold in front of himself.

“Nathan…” Warren starts slowly. And Nathan lets him. He doesn’t know why, he’s desperate to shut it down by yelling at Warren to stop talking. Like he always does. But he doesn’t. “Do you know anything about what might’ve happened to–”

Before the conversation can escalate any further, a knock at the door sounds out and instantly stills the air. They both whip their heads in the direction of the noise, momentarily struck by its interruption. Then Warren gets up from his seat at the edge of the bed to answer it and Nathan’s filled with relief at its disruption.

“Hope you guys like breakfast burritos.” Lou’s voice can be heard from the hallway on the other side of the door. Warren widens it from the original few inches he’d opened it to and Lou comes in with a couple of bags in her hands. “I brought some other things, too. Some clothes and toiletries, I’m sure you’re both desperate for a little bit of basic personal hygiene.”

Nathan can’t express how badly he craves a shower, though he doesn’t need to when Warren expresses it enough for the both of them with a drawn out, “You have *noooooo ideaaaa.”*

“You’re a life saver, Lou. Warren was starting to attract flies.” Nathan angles himself away as he takes one of the bags from Lou to hide his triumphant smile when Warren stands open-mouthed in shock.

“Do I smell that bad?” and as if proving Nathan’s internal view of Warren as the stereotypical teenage smelly boy he is, Warren raises his arm in a dog-like manner to take a whiff of his armpit. Lou’s expression scrunches up in a sympathetic way that only further cements the look of horror on Warren’s face. “Why did no one tell me?!”

“Just did.” Nathan’s digging in the bag he’d grabbed to fish out a bottle of body wash, chucking it Warren’s way with unnecessary force, “here you go, stinky.”

Warren catches it, though barely and with a significant lack of grace before Lou chimes in, “I picked out some stuff you can put on once you’re all cleaned up in here.” She hands him the bag she still holds onto. “There should be a towel in there for you, too.”

Juggling everything in his hands–plus the additional bottles of shampoo and conditioner that Nathan piles on–Warren inches towards the door. “Guess I’m taking a shower then.” He hesitates for a second, turning back to Nathan with a hushed tone, “I mean, uh, unless you want me to stay–”

Nathan rolls his eyes, opening the door for Warren, “just go.” He closes the door again after ushering Warren out, turning to face Lou on the other side of the room. She sends him an easygoing smile while unpacking the rest of the stuff from the bag Nathan had taken earlier. He’s slightly hung up on how much the mannerism reflects Warren, really taking in the resemblance they share. It makes him wonder how similar he might look to his father. The

teenage version of him Nathan saw the day prior. He hadn't had the mental capacity to think over it before. And now he finds the comparison makes him feel somewhat sick.

"Did you two sleep alright?" Lou eyes Nathan.

"Best sleep I've had in ages," It isn't a lie–nor an exaggeration either–as far as his nightmares go, the one he'd woken up from that morning was tame. And compared to the complete lack of sleep he'd had the night before, it was certainly better than nothing. Slightly sweaty was a step up from being drenched, which was a daily occurrence for him before being brought to the past. *And mentally going over where you've last hidden your gun each morning.* A small detail he hasn't had to worry about since coming here. "Thanks, by the way." Lou raises an eyebrow at him. "For giving us a place to stay. And buying us food. All of your help, really." He's aware of how fucked he and Warren would have been if it wasn't for her. "Warren's real lucky to have someone like you. And to have that extend over to me…"

Lou's waving her hand in dismissal before he's even finished talking, "it's nothing. You're Warren's friend. As strange as this whole thing is, I guess that kind've makes you part of the family. Besides, I've watched way too much sci-fi shit to be that phased over how weird this all is, if I'm being honest."

Guilt washes over Nathan in a wave. He isn't a friend to Warren. He's gone as far as yelling at him to confirm that they aren't. He'd been adamant on the fact because he'd convinced himself that nobody cares. Not really. Even when they seem like they do. Even when they *swear* that they do. Who was Warren to be any different? But now…Nathan's torn. He's not so sure what to believe anymore.

He doesn't find a sufficient way to continue his conversation with Lou, so he doesn't. Instead, he begins to drift around the room while he waits for Warren to return. And even though it's just him and Lou, he doesn't find it awkward.

Gliding his fingers along one of the bookcases lining the walls, Nathan stops short when he sees an old camera tucked away in one of the corners. With his curiosity getting the better of him, he carefully pries it out to examine it in his hands more closely. It's a film camera. A Canon AF35M, to be exact. He's always appreciated the classic look of film to digital, preferring to use a film camera himself.

"Oh, that? That's Harry's, he doesn't use it much anymore since I got him the new model for his birthday earlier this year. You're free to use it, if you'd like. Warren mentioned you do photography."

Nathan looks up, slightly surprised, "he did?"

"Yeah, said you never go anywhere without your camera. I'd meant to look for it, though it looks like you beat me to it."

He looks back down at the camera. He hadn't touched his own for weeks now. Not since working with Jefferson. In the dark room. Nathan no longer felt the drive to hone his talents because it only left him feeling sick. Like he was back there. Like that part of him was ruined and never to be restored. *Corrupted.* Because of what he's done. Losing the one thing he

believed he held any real grip over in his life. But just as everything else, he didn't know how easily that, too, had slipped from his grasp.

Nathan swallows, his throat having gone dry. "No, I shouldn't." With shaky fingers, he goes to place the camera back in the spot he found it, but Lou's hand stops him.

"Please, take it. I should have some batteries lying around somewhere, and I think Harry left some colour film inside it still." She moves to open a couple of drawers in search of batteries, finding a pair with a triumphant ' *ah ha'* and throwing them Nathan's way. "Pop these in." With some reluctance, Nathan complies. And once he's secured both batteries in their place, him and Lou peer over it in anticipation. "Is it working?" Lou questions over his shoulder.

"Only one way to find out," Nathan presses down on the shutter lightly until a red light pops up, bringing the camera up to his face. Just as he does so, the door swings open with Warren's re-arrival. Nathan lifts his gaze through the viewfinder to find Warren decked out in his new 80s attire, an oversized–though, not intentionally–white collared shirt tucked into dark brown corduroy pants fitted with a thick, black belt. Nathan's a little hung up on the image of Warren, looking quite put together. He comes in with one hand holding up the pyjamas he's changed out of and the other branding a toothbrush and tube of toothpaste in a way like he just caught a pair of prize fish. "Smile, Graham." Warren freezes in obvious surprise for only a fraction of a second before his expression breaks out into a wide grin, flashing his newly cleaned teeth.

The camera clicks then whirs to indicate it's moving on to the next shot. "You found a camera! That's awesome!" Warren excitedly bounds up to him, tilting his head expectantly as if to see the result of the photo. "Oh, I guess we have to wait to develop them."

"So it goes," Lou sighs before picking up the coat she discarded after first arriving. "Anyways, I'm going to head to the lab to get a head start with the reactor. You two take your time and meet me there once you're ready, alright?" She gestures an open hand at the covered reactor that's stashed away in the corner next to where Warren stands.

He bends down to grab it and hands it over to her. "Okay, we'll see you soon then… if you're sure you don't need he–"

"I'm sure," she sends them a wink, already halfway out of the door. "Stay out of trouble!" And then Lou's gone.

Warren still stands at Nathan's side, close enough that he gets a whiff of the shampoo Warren used. Nathan's eyeing him, taking in his damp hair that begins to curl in at his neck as it's drying. Not a hint of product to tame the wild state it's in, pieces falling in front of his face haphazardly. Effortlessly styled. Nathan internally grieves for his own hair.

"Oh, right–sorry. Personal space," Warren holds his hands up innocently, taking a step back. Nathan remains rooted to his spot, frowning slightly.

"I wasn't–"

"I never should've–"

They both start at the same time, cutting off what they're saying in tandem to wait for the other to continue. "What were you going to say?" Nathan asks before Warren has the chance to first. Warren looks down, chewing his lip as if in contemplation of whether to actually commit to what he began.

"I was going to say," he clears his throat. "That I shouldn't have asked you about, uh… I shouldn't have said anything earlier. I realized it might've come off like some sort of interrogation or something and I… didn't mean it like that. Just, after last night I thought if you ever *did* feel like talking, that I'm, um. Here."

Nathan doesn't say anything, in truth he has no idea how to respond. When Warren first mentioned Rachel, Nathan had been too shaken up to notice he was asking from a place of worry. Too wrapped up in his sense of suffocating guilt that his fight or flight instincts were the only thing left to kick in and maneuver the situation. He *had* felt interrogated. He felt blamed. And in turn he'd become defensive. *Because he* is *to blame.*

Warren twists his hands together, expression scrunching up in unison. "Sorry, I'm overstepping again–just act like I didn't open my stupid mouth–"

"It's okay," Nathan interjects before Warren has the chance to spiral further. "Thanks."

The evident panic in Warren's eyes dissipates, letting out a breathy, "sure." Then he's bringing up a hand to rub at the back of his neck, a small smile curling the corners of his lips. Nathan's attention is acutely drawn to it, aware of how awkward it's become between them. He sharply turns away, busying himself with the handful of items he needs for getting ready.

The sound of the bed creaking makes him stop, peering back over his shoulder to see Warren settled back on its edge. He's looking around the room in a way Nathan knows it absent of any thought. "What're you doing?"

Warren's focus snaps back to Nathan, blinking at him. "...waiting for you?"

"...why?" Nathan questions Warren with genuine inquiry, though he's aware it likely comes off more scrutinizing than anything else. Warren, in turn, looks vaguely terrified, so Nathan continues, "if you're ready, you can go meet up with Lou. I'll catch up with you once I'm finished. I know you're probably dying to get back to it."

"Oh. yeah," Warren jumps up as if he'd been electrocuted. "Yeah. Totally. Sure."

Warren doesn't move, prompting Nathan to gesture toward the door, "*okayyyy*. I'll see you later, then."

"Right." Warren finally goes to leave, casually tripping over something as he starts to walk past Nathan.

Without much thought, Nathan holds up a hand, making contact with Warren's chest to stop him. "Hold up, give me the dorm room key before you go." Warren's eyes grow wide before he wordlessly complies by fumbling to dig into his pocket. He manages to retrieve it, handing it to Nathan, who finally lowers his hand.

Warren continues standing there until Nathan gives him a weird look, setting him into motion once more. “Okay. See ya.”

Then he’s gone, though, barely a minute passes before there’s a knock at the door. When Nathan opens it, he’s not surprised to see Warren standing there with a grimace, pointing inside the room behind him, “I, uh, forgot my shoes.”

Nathan looks back to see Warren’s shoes lying in the middle of the room. The same obstacle he’d tripped over on his way out prior. Nathan widens the door with a flat expression waiting as Warren creeps back in and hastily puts his shoes on, then sending an embarrassed smile at Nathan on his way back out.

Nathan rolls his eyes as he closes the door behind him, for what he thinks is the final time. But when he turns around he immediately zeros in on the pair of breakfast burritos Lou brought them still sitting on the desk.

He groans, snatching one up and storming out of the room. Warren’s halfway down the hallway when Nathan calls out to him, sending the burrito flying down the dormitories before he’s even fully turned around, “hey freak, you forgot this, too!”

-

The scalding temperature of the water hitting his skin underneath the harsh stream of the shower always serves as a contrast to the numbness. It’s become a distraction from the consistent thoughts that circle through his head.

Jefferson. The darkroom. Rachel. The darkroom. Warren…

Warren. A new addition to his thoughts, but not one as unwelcome as the others. A new distraction.

Warren, who’d been there with Nathan after first waking up from his nightmare. A steady hand at his side, and a sight of almost instant alleviation. Nathan doesn’t know what to think of that.

He attempts not to think of it at all, though not with as much fear induced resilience that he is used to forcing upon himself. Nor with being bothered by the fact that his mind lingers back to the subject anyways, to the point where he is able to lessen the intensity of the water's heat and remain in the shower for longer than he usually would.

It’s nice, as he hasn’t had a chance to shower in forever. Feeling grimy, for once more in body than in soul. It feels good to rid himself of it.

When he’s done–and deems it’s been a sufficient amount of time–Nathan returns to Lou’s room to get dressed. He unpacks the last bag containing the change of clothes Lou brought him, pulling out a pair of classic 80s style blue denim jeans that he hoists on. Digging into the

bottom of the bag, he lifts out a tight, plaid button down shirt. Nathan hesitates, it's *atrocious*. Big, bright blue and orange squares make up the design and Nathan knows he wouldn't be caught dead wearing it. He holds it at arm's length, letting it plop back into the bag. *No thanks.*

Nathan scans the room for something else. *Anything* else, stopping when he gets to the discarded pile of pyjamas on the bed that Warren left. Picking up the oversized *Grease* shirt, he gives it a whiff to make sure it's even acceptable enough to wear. It smells like… well, it smells like Warren. Like how his sweater smells. It's indescribable, but not unpleasant.

As Nathan pulls it over his head and proceeds to tuck the shirt into his jeans he briefly considers if his varsity jacket has his own similar distinguishable smell that Warren's picked up on. And if it, too, isn't considered unpleasant to him.

Warren had taken it again that morning when leaving. Wordlessly, and somehow as Nathan was hoping he'd do. It remained just as baggy on Warren as it did on Nathan, yet the way Warren holds himself in it is… Nathan doesn't know. It's indescribable. Just as the scent he leaves behind on his clothes. He doesn't know how to describe it, but he knows he likes it.

He likes the way Warren's hands disappear into the sleeves. He likes the way it drapes across his slender shoulders. He likes the way it swallows him whole. He likes the way his brown hair looks in contrast to the maroon of the jacket. A piece of Nathan that Warren wants to have around. A piece of Nathan that doesn't hurt anyone.

He even likes the stupid way Warren flaps his arms like a stupid bird in those stupid oversized sleeves when he gets caught up in his rambling. The thought makes the corners of his lips quirk upward. Then he rolls his eyes–at himself more than anything else. *Ridiculous.*

Nathan grabs Warren's sweater instinctively as part of their newly formed habit, after being reminded from the thought of his jacket. He'd been fond of it even before Warren offered it to him their first night, having been surprised at someone like Warren owning such a piece. Though, not as surprised as when Warren had done the gesture of offering it to him for the night. A surprise that, at the time, had been misinterpreted as disgust–clearly indicated by Warren's reaction.

He puts it on now, pretty much ready to meet up with Warren and Lou at the lab. But when he goes to look for his shoes, he can't find them. They're nowhere near the door where he is sure he kicked them off the previous night. Checking underneath the bed–in case they'd managed to find their way there in the haze of that night–or the corners of the small dorm room proves just as fruitless.

For a split-second Nathan wonders if Warren had taken those, too–but no, Nathan saw him put on his own shoes earlier when he'd–miraculously–forgotten to do so originally after leaving for the lab. With little motivation to continue his search, he eventually gives up. It's not something Nathan's extremely hung up on. In complete truth, Nathan's not bothered at all.

He finds a pair of worn, white converse beside the desk that he pulls onto his feet instead. Lou's, perhaps, but still in a size that's comfortable enough to wear. And then he's

straightening up to reach for the doorknob, but something makes him hesitate. On top of the tables sits the camera Lou insisted he use. He'd put it there before he left to shower with no intention to actually pick it back up. The offer was kind, though Nathan doesn't know if he's ready to use it.

You don't deserve it. Warren would think otherwise. *But he doesn't know the extent of what you've done.*

Nathan turns away from the camera to face the door, opening it but not leaving. In an impulsive decision, he grabs at the camera and slings it onto his shoulder to cross his body.

Fuck it.

-

Nathan's outside the lab that the three of them spent the majority of the previous day at, turning the handle to meet with Warren and Lou inside. They don't so much as glance up at his arrival, heads downturned as they mull over their project and commune in low voices. Nathan couldn't imagine being so engrossed by something.

Focusing on Warren, Nathan takes in how concentrated he is, never having seen the guy so serious with his eyebrows drawn together and using some plier-looking-type tool to work on something within the disembowelled reactor.

Warren and Lou's heads are side by side, looking almost like twins as they work away. And with the way the sunlight streams into the lab, Nathan almost wishes he can encapsulate this moment for Warren to look back on. He remembers the film camera now slung across his body, suddenly thankful he'd made the last minute decision to take it with him in the end.

Lining up the shot, Nathan holds his breath before committing to the frame and pressing down on the shutter. The mechanical noise emitting from the camera disturbs the peaceful quiet of the room. Warren's head immediately snaps up at Nathan, his mouth hung open like he'd been mid-sentence. A second later, his face breaks as he beams at Nathan. Smiling so wide–at *Nathan.* Like he's happy to see him.

There's a tightening in Nathan's chest that extends to his throat for a fracture of a second because… he can't recall the last time someone looked at him that way. Not his mom, certainly not his dad. He hasn't seen his sister in *years*. Even Vic, who he considers his closest friend, hadn't directed a smile his way that wasn't filled with reservation for so long he forgets what genuine affection looks like from her anymore.

Nathan doesn't know what to do with… that. Seizing up as his fight or flight instinct kicks in and settles on freezing in place instead when Warren drops what it is he's doing.

“Hey!” Warren rounds the lab bench and is bounding up to Nathan’s side. “So I have some good news! Lou and I think we can get the reactor working in time tomorrow to get home!”

Nathan’s stomach drops, “that’s great.”

“But there’s also some bad news…” Warren continues, “the material I used for the lining of the interior walls happens to be, uh…” He pauses to nervously rub at the back of his neck, and Nathan can’t help following the movement. Warren screws up his face before concluding, “pretty *pricey.”*

Nathan opens his mouth to respond, but Warren cuts back in before he has the chance. “But I have more good news!” Nathan closes his mouth, staring at him expectantly. “There’s a school dance happening tonight that Lou told me about, she said we should go, I think we should, too!”

He’s grasped onto Nathan’s arm in obvious excitement, shaking it a little. His eyes bear into Nathan’s with hopeful naivety and all Nathan can manage is a choked, “okay.”

“Sick!” Warren shakes Nathan’s arm a little more in emphasis before he drops it completely, seemingly distracted as his gaze drifts upward. “Your hair’s all wavy.”

It’s a simple observation, but it instantly makes Nathan feel too perceived. “I didn’t have any product.”

Without warning, Warren reaches out a hand to run through it, “I like it more like this.” Then he drops his hand to motion Nathan over to the lab bench where Lou still sits. “Come, let me show you what we’ve done so far.”

Nathan follows Warren wordlessly, stopping on the opposite side of the lab bench where the reactor sits with its door open. Lou flashes him a smile and a wink, “nice shoes.”

Nathan looks down at the converse strapped to his feet, “oh, I couldn’t find mine.”

“It’s my fault, your shoes were caked in mud so I took the liberty of getting them cleaned. I left those out for you.”

“M-mud?” Nathan stutters, frowning.

Lou cocks her head, “From the storm, perhaps? The one you two got caught in.”

“Yes, very cool, very spiffy new shoes. Nathan looks great in them, now if I can divert your attention over to the time machine…” Warren interrupts, tugging at Nathan’s sleeve in a way that would have made him deck anyone in the past. But instead of doing that–in front of his own mom, no less–Nathan gives Warren the attention he’s seeking.

He peers into the opening of the reactor as Warren begins shooting off about all the repairs and additions the two of them made so far to the inside. Nathan follows along for the first minute or so, until he’s completely lost. He flicks his eyes up at Warren, “no offense, Graham, but I have no idea what you’re talking about anymore.”

Warren drops the two screwdrivers he'd been using to point with–and that Nathan hadn't realized he'd picked up during the process of his explanation–to meet Nathan's gaze. "Oh, yeah. No worries. It's kind've a lot, I know." He's turned a little red at the interruption and Nathan has to try hard to keep a smirk from twisting the corners of his mouth.

"Hey, I'm sure it's all super impressive, buddy."

Warren clears his throat as Lou swoops in, pointing to a single light silver-coloured wall on the inside, "Basically, we need more of this material to coat the inner walls of the reactor. This is about the extent of what Blackwell has to offer and we took it all. I don't feel comfortable substituting the material with something else at the sake of it not working and, thus, not getting you two boys home. We can outsource it–in fact, I know a hardware store that carries it–but it's not cheap."

"How expensive are we talking?" Nathan asks.

Warren and Lou exchange a look before Lou responds. "I want to say it's about 160 per wall so… almost 500 in total."

Nathan nods his head. "That's a lot."

"Yeah…" Warren sighs.

"But I have an idea where we might be able to find that much."

Warren blinks up at Nathan, concern slowly creasing his features as the shock fades. "Why do I not have a good feeling about this…"

-

"I *really* don't have a good feeling about this," Warren whispers beside Nathan, so close that he thinks Warren might grab onto his arm again. This time lacking in exhilaration.

" *Shhh*, it'll be fine." There's no need for them to whisper as Nathan leads them both down the hallway of the boys' dorms. He then stops in front of one of the doors. "I think it's this one."

Warren almost knocks into him. "What if he's in there?"

"He's not."

"How do you know?"

"He's not." Nathan repeats.

"But how–"

“Okay, I *don’t* know! But could you please shut up?”

Warren’s expression still conveys his unease, but he does as Nathan asks and stops talking. Instead, he watches in horror as Nathan finds a fire extinguisher hanging on the wall and pries it off.

“I don’t think that’s a very–” Nathan interrupts what Warren’s saying as he forces the extinguisher down onto the doorknob. It smashes clean off. “–good Idea.” Warren finishes with added strain.

Nathan discards the extinguisher and pushes the door, swinging it open. They stare into darkness before Nathan flicks on the light switch. The room is in pristine condition, barely even lived in by the looks of it. There’s a bed similar to Lou’s and a matching desk. That’s where the similarities stop, sharing no same coziness that Lou’s room has. No posters hanging on the walls or books or memorabilia littering the space. No fun purple lava lamp that Warren geeked out over for a whole minute and that Nathan, too, has come to regard fondly over, either. It’s just…boring.

There’s nothing here that gives any sort of indication to who Nathan’s dad is as a teenager. Or maybe not what Nathan imagined his dad being like.

“Jeez, is your room this eerily clean, too? This a Prescott thing?” Warren questions as he gazes around the place.

“No.” Nathan hesitates, “I…I don’t think so.” *Is his room like this?* He shakes his head, pushing the thought from his mind and strides across the room to begin looking for places his dad might’ve tucked a stash of money. “Stand guard at the door in case he comes.”

Raiding his father’s dorm for cash probably isn’t the best idea, Nathan will admit. But seeing as they don’t have any other option, and little time, it still acts as a solution to their problem. Besides, what’s a little cash to someone like Sean Prescott?

He starts under the bed, not surprised when it’s barren, working his way over to the closet with no luck either. Eventually, he gets to the desk, pulling open each drawer in anticipation until he sees a wad of bills held together by an elastic band. “ *Score.”* He counts a little over what they need.

Warren eyes him, “are you sure he’s not going to miss 500 bucks? That’s like…” Warren pauses for a second, “almost equivalent to 1000 dollars in our time.”

Nathan stops mid-closing the drawer to send a scowl Warren’s way, “did you… did you just do that math in your head?”

Warren shrugs, giving Nathan a lopsided smile, “inflation’s a bitch.”

“Whatever,” Nathan rolls his eyes. “And trust me. He can spare it.” He chucks the wad of cash Warren’s way as he squeezes past him through the doorframe. “Here, stash it in your pocket. I’ll be right back.”

Warren fumbles with the money, quickly shovelling it into the varsity jacket as he looks after Nathan with alarm, “where are you going!?”

“Just give me a sec!” Nathan calls over his shoulder. He darts into the washroom, diving into one of the stalls to yank out a roll of toilet paper from its dispenser. He does the same in the next stall over and hastily makes his way back to the room where Warren still peeks out of.

“What’re you doing?” Warren frowns, looking down at the rolls of toilet paper in Nathan’s hands, pressing himself into the door as Nathan slides back inside.

Nathan tosses one to him once inside, “ever TP’d a room before?”

Warren–to his character–effortlessly misses the roll thrown to him, bending down to pick it up. “Can’t say that I have… but, uh, why are we doing this?”

“It’s fun.” Nathan responds, holding one end in his hand while throwing the roll in an arc across the length of the room.

“Right…”

“And it will cover up the real reason we were in here. He’ll just think someone’s messing with him.”

“Oh,” Warren’s eyes light up, “that’s smart!” he lifts up his own roll, launching it straight at Nathan to pelt him in the face.

“*Ow!* The fuck was that, Graham?!”

“*OhmyGod!* I am *soooo* sorry–I didn’t mean–”

But Nathan’s laughing, because, *ridiculous. Warren’s ridiculous.* He grabs the roll from the floor, “here, nerd, give it another shot. Maybe hold onto the end of it this time, too?” Warren does try again, and this time he manages not to hit Nathan. Before long, the two decorate the entirety of the room, tossing their respective rolls around until streams of toilet paper hang all around them.

“That *was* fun,” Warren’s beaming at Nathan.

Nathan flings his empty cardboard roll at Warren in an attempt to make him stop smiling at him, “told ya.”

The sound of a door opening echoes in the hallway outside. Warren’s smile instantly drops from his face and he begins scurrying to the entrance of the room. “Shit, it’s him!” He turns his wide eyes back to Nathan.

“Fuck, let’s go!”

“What do we do?!”

“ *Run!”* Nathan’s pushing Warren into the hallway, following after him.

“Excuse me, what the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?!” Nathan doesn’t even look in the direction where he knows his dad’s coming from–who yells after them now–booking it the opposite way through the dorms and towards the back exit. He holds the backdoor open to usher Warren through, who flies past him and along the back pathway. They’ve barely taken any steps when the back door bursts open behind them. “Hey! Do you know who the *fuck* I am? Get back here!”

They book it through the main campus with Nathan’s dad hot on their heels. He hasn’t caught up to them, thankfully, but he’s fast, and Nathan’s quickly coming to the conclusion that he’s not as fit as he thought he was. *Damn you cigarettes.* Perhaps actually *playing* football in the past would have aided him in this sort of scenario.

“Where are we going??” Warren directs the question to Nathan as they run side by side, sprinting across the grass. A few students look up in interest as they pass. One kid–Argyle?–waggles a hang-loose sign, looking totally zenned out.

“Your car–parking lot,” Nathan responds with a laborious breath. He points to the stairs that lead down towards the lot, chancing a look over his shoulder to see his teenage dad coming at them full speed wearing a stern expression reminiscent of his future self, all too familiar to Nathan growing up. It sends a chill down his body. *Too real.*

He can practically taste freedom, jumping two steps at a time down the stairs. He’s halfway across the parking lot when–” *Ouf!”* Nathan whips around just in time to see Warren trip over the last step, crashing to the ground.

“Graham–!”

Nathan’s dad is on him in the next instant, “oh no you don’t, you little shit!” He punches him in the stomach, causing Warren to curl in on himself and roll further into the parking lot, but it doesn’t stop his dad from grabbing at his shoulder to pin Warren back down on his back again. He raises his fist, this time aiming for his face.

The image fills Nathan with a deep-set rage, almost blinded by it, clenching his jaw and charging toward his father. “Get. The fuck. *Off him.”* He grabs at the raised arm, dragging him off of Warren and onto the ground, throwing his own punch to meet with his face. It’s obvious that his dad hadn’t expected that, startled as he looks up at Nathan.

“Who the fuck–”

“Shut up!” Nathan sends his fist downward again, knocking into his cheek, then his abdomen. He coughs, mimicking the same movement of curling up and falling to the side. Nathan uses it as an opportunity to see if Warren’s okay. He seems to be, as he manages to get back onto his feet. “Go–get to the car!” Warren stares at him in shock. *“Now!”* He snaps out of it, quickly nodding before he turns away.

Nathan doesn’t anticipate the blow to the side of his head, or how he falls face first onto the gritty asphalt. Pain explodes along the bridge of his nose all the way up to his brow, but he doesn’t have time to dwell on it when hands flip him back around. He squints against the

bright sky before it's blotted out with the silhouette of a fist that hovers for only a second, colliding with his nose the next.

His hands fly up to cover his face, gasping for air but choking on his own blood as it begins to run into his throat and pool there. He tries to sit up, but arms pin him down. He can't see from behind the stars that dance across his vision and once again he feels the brutal strike of a punch against his temple.

"Don't fucking touch him!" He hears Warren from somewhere above him, then the crushing weight from on top of him is lifted. The muffled grunt of who he assumes is his dad comes from his other side and Nathan scrambles upright, spitting blood in an attempt to breathe. "Come on!' A gentle hand cups around his arm, helping him up. Nathan blinks, his vision returning to make out Warren's face–plastered with concern–and beyond him, his car, its doors open and the engine running.

Nathan never thought he'd be so glad to see the old piece of junk, letting Warren guide him back on his feet before throwing himself into the passenger's side of the car. One hand stays pressed over his nose while the other grasps at the door, bringing it towards him to close with haste. Warren's already beside him, throwing the stick shift into drive and flooring it.

Without the necessity, but with a brash and impulsive decision, Nathan rolls down the window as they rip out of the parking lot. He flings up a middle finger just as his dad struggles to his feet. "Fuck you, Prescott!" he yells the words, though they come out somewhat muffled and wet. But *God* does it feel good.

"You have no idea what you fucking freaks have gotten yourselves into! Wait 'til I tell my father about this bullshit! My family will ruin you" He distantly shouts in return, waving a bloody fist in the air. Nathan's laughing hysterically all the while, probably a hell of a sight with his bloodied teeth and almost broken nose.

" *OhGodohGodohGod,* are you alright?" Warren's freaking out, hands clenched around the steering wheel and casting worried glances at Nathan periodically. Periodically meaning every other second.

"I'm fine."

"You're fine? How can you be fine!? Your nose–"

"I'm *fineeeeee*, see?" Nathan adjusts the hand covering his nose to grin at Warren. In return, Warren's face grows a shade paler.

"We should go back–get you to the school nurse–"

Nathan groans, "no, we shouldn't. I just need some ice. Pull into the first gas station you see." Warren's brow creases together and he chews at his bottom lip, but he doesn't argue further.

Five minutes later, they're pulling into an *E-Z Gas.* Warren wastes no time as he's already whipping off his seatbelt and climbing out of the car, "stay right there, I'll be back in a

second!”

Nathan nods from his seated position with his head leaning back against the headrest and his eyes shut. Only as soon as Warren’s left, Nathan proceeds to grapple for the car handle and roll out. He needs fresh air, though he leans heavily on the side of the car as he discovers some bruised ribs at the movement.

Managing to move himself to the front of the car, Nathan props himself up so he can sit on the hood. Warren’s back after only a few minutes, rushing out of the gas station store cradling something that is definitely *not* ice. “They ran out of ice so I got you a bag of frozen peas instead.”

“Thanks,” Nathan murmurs, lifting out his unbloodied, unused hand.

Warren swats it away, “move your hand, let me see.” Nathan rolls his eyes, but complies, dropping his hand. Warren winces, then steadily raises the peas. He delicately presses over the bridge of his nose, and even though the contact is so carefully done, Nathan inhales sharply through his teeth from the way it stings. “Sorry–I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Nathan squeezes his eyes shut, but finds the pain to be more unbearable when he does. So he opens them, trying to focus on something to ease the sting. For a second all he sees is the vibrant green of the bag until it shifts and Warren comes into view. He’s super focused, brow low like it had been in the lab earlier that day. Lips pressed together in concentration as he studies Nathan’s nose and the gentle application of pressure against it.

Fingers lightly touch the bottom of his chin and Nathan jolts. “Hold still,” Warren breathes out. Nathan does instantly, not daring to breathe himself. He doesn’t even blink, staring at the curve of Warren’s nose that is mere inches from his own face. How had Nathan so carelessly thrown a fist to it not even a week ago? There isn’t any evidence of it happening left to observe, and Nathan doesn’t know if that’s better or if he should be reminded of what he’s done by the fact being evident. Either way, there is a deep regret that comes with the acknowledgement.

Eventually, Warren lowers the bag and hands him a white shirt. Nathan frowns, holding it up to see an obnoxiously bright print reading ‘ *I Visited Arcadia Bay!’* with a heart and a lighthouse on either side. Nathan peeks around it at Warren with a raised eyebrow.

“I panicked, okay? I didn’t think tissues were going to cut it so I grabbed that.” Nathan refrains from saying anything as he balls it up and holds it under his nose. It’s substantially numb now, so the bleeding has subsided. His eyes idly travel back upward, aware of how close Warren stands in between his legs, still clutching his now partially thawed bag of peas.

Warren seems to notice, too, taking a step back and clearing his throat. He nervously rubs a hand at the back of his neck, “man, he really fucked you up, huh.”

“Yeah. Are you alright?”

Warren waves a hand in dismissal, taking a seat beside Nathan on the hood of the car, “ *pshh*, yeah. My pride’s mostly hurt from taking that dumb fall. Scraped my knee up, but other than

that, it's not so bad. I've definitely had worse–" he cuts himself off.

Nathan flinches, realizing he's alluding to when Nathan did pretty much the exact same thing to him in the exact same parking lot not so long ago. There's something so cruelly ironic about it. *And now he's helping you.*

He wants to apologize, the need overtakes him so suddenly. But when he opens his mouth the words can't come out. They physically don't manifest, and he realizes it's because he's…too afraid.

"Hey, don't worry about it," so casually put but for the fact that Warren says it so softly, his big, doe-like eyes shyly aimed towards Nathan. So open.

Nathan sighs, "well, I'm glad he beat the shit out of me instead of you back there. And I gotta admit, it was pretty cathartic to do the same to him." They both laugh at that, not fully, but enough to ease some of the tension Nathan has on his chest.

"That's kinda messed up, dude." Warren lightly knocks into Nathan's shoulder. His easygoing smile falters a little, fidgeting with his hands in his lap and Nathan thinks maybe things still aren't comfortable after the awkward moment. "Listen, I was thinking… about what things will be like once we get back–and I know you said we can't be friends and everything, but maybe… well, if you wanted–or, if you are okay with it–perhaps we can still, like, stay. Knowing. Each other."

Warren's not looking at Nathan anymore. And Nathan can't bring himself to look at Warren, either. Warren sounds so genuine, nervous because of how Nathan might react. Nathan swallows, finding it harder than he thought it would be to have this sort of conversation. Never anticipating things between them to go the way they are going. He shifts slightly away from his spot next to Warren, building himself up to respond.

"I can't go back with you."

Warren blinks, "Wait, what?"

"It's really not a big deal, okay. Everything will be alright."

"What are you talking about? No it won't! I can't leave you here."

"Seriously, it's fine."

"But… everything we've done, I…" Warren doesn't get angry, Nathan can't say he's surprised. It's not in his nature, Nathan's come to realize that. Instead, he holds something so purely represented as grief, it's hard to look at. And somehow it's so much worse than if Warren had actually gotten angry. Nathan *wishes* he did, that he'd lash out at him, swear at him, give Nathan *something* because it's easier to deal with. It's all Nathan's ever known. "I thought we were in this together?"

"Well, you thought wrong!" He snaps.

"I–I don't understand–"

“Just let it go.” Nathan has to physically turn away from Warren now, not being able to bear the way Warren is looking at him.

“Why?”

“I just can’t, Warren. I–can’t” It’s more than just going back, it’s *all* of this. Whatever this is. Him and Warren. It’s not fair towards Warren. He’s better off without him. Nathan would just…drag him down. *Or worse*, a sinister voice that sounds all too familiar snakes into his thoughts. *He could be next*. The black and white image of Warren lying dead in a landfill flashes through his mind. Nathan physically recoils at that, jumping off the hood of the car.

Warren does the same, “I’m not leaving you.” There’s determination in his voice now.

“*God*, can’t you take no as a fucking answer?” Nathan turns on Warren. “I said I’d help you and I did! You can go home now, you don’t need me anymore!” He’s getting riled up, Nathan can sense it like a coil tightening further and further all while Waren looks at him with a mixture of pain and confusion. It only adds to Nathan’s frustration. Frustration that he’s building on himself, making it worse. Always making it worse. “And I’m not going to that stupid dance!”

There is genuine hurt reflected in Warren’s expression when Nathan spits the words out. It stings worse than anything he’s ever known, and he regrets them almost instantly.

A normal person would apologize. A shittier person might at least try to reconcile the situation, try to move past it. So he doesn’t know what that makes him when he opts to harden his expression with a dry, “thanks for the shirt,” and start walking away because he doesn’t want to hear what Warren will respond with.

“Where are you going?”

“To be alone.”

“Nathan–”

“I need to be alone.”

Warren doesn’t say anything else. There’s nothing else *to* say. Nathan just leaves, he doesn’t even bother to cast a glance over his shoulder when he does. He just walks away, no idea where he’s going but knowing there’s truth in his need for solitude.

-

The crashing waves create a steady rhythm for Nathan to breathe alongside. It’s easier than counting to three over and over in his head. And it stops him from thinking of… well, *everything.*

He stands on the beach, his legs having carried him to the familiar spot in town. If he focuses on the waves, it's almost like he'd never travelled back in time. There's something comforting about this place, especially during the off season when it isn't as populated. He likes the way his shoes sink in the sand and the steadiness of his hands buried in the pockets of his sweater. Warren's sweater. *Warren*.

Yeah. That didn't last long.

He lets out a long sigh, which he wishes he could turn into a scream. But he doesn't want to scare the lady playing fetch with her dog on the beach. Warren would love this dog. It's big with splotches of brown and orange and white, whatever that means. With a stubby tail that doesn't stop wagging the entirety of running up and down the shore, chasing after its stick.

Nathan shouldn't have left Warren at the gas station. But he knows that if he didn't he would have suffocated. He needs some time, even if it means being by himself. Even if it means being alone with his thoughts.

Every time he closes his eyes he sees him. Hears him. *Feels* him. Images that flash through his mind so real he's almost back there. Hand clamping down on his shoulder as he's being handed pictures. Pictures of Kate. Of Rachel. Expressions vacous and unfocused, faces pressed against a white floor. Pale and doped out of their minds.

Pictures of himself beside Rachel's body, similarly out of it and unrecognizable save for the dirt he'd woken up with on his cheek and his shoes and pants caked in mud. He hadn't known where it came from when initially waking up. Not until days later, the pieces clicking together as he's focusing on the photograph that Jefferson handed to him. Rachel and him. The two of them lying side by side in her grave.

Art, he'd called it. One of his best pieces yet.

That's when Nathan found out Rachel Amber was dead. Overdosed. *His fault*.

The thought alone almost makes him vomit. Like he had done when first finding out. And like he did when the posters first started to appear. Her eyes staring into his. They said enough. *You did this to me.*

So, no. *I'm sorry, Warren.* Nathan never had any real intention of going back with him.

He cannot, in good conscience, go back there. To the future. If Jefferson's there, Nathan doesn't want anything to do with that time. Besides, he shouldn't be allowed anywhere near the people they've hurt. Warren would agree.

-

Making a stop by the Two Whales diner, Nathan does a pretty shitty job cleaning himself up in their public washroom. His nose looks…fine, after all the blood's been washed off of his

face. Once he's finished, he sits at one of the booths. The same one he and Warren sat at back on their first day. Young Joyce is kind enough to offer Nathan a cup of coffee and a burger on the house, seeing as he *'forgot his money'*. He hadn't planned to mooch for free–declining at first–mostly making the decision to stay at the diner to take shelter from the rain that has started up outside. He wonders if it's the beginnings of the storm that will carry out the following day. October 10th. The day they're supposed to go back. But instead, it will just be Warren going, leaving Nathan behind.

Shortly after accepting and devouring his meal–unaware of how hungry he'd become–Nathan catches a bus back to Blackwell. He doesn't really have anywhere else to go. It's grown dark out, and Nathan's clued into the fact that this is the longest he's been absent of Warren since first coming here. He walks through campus in the steady downfall until he's back at the dorms. He returns to Lou's room, using the key still pocketed from that morning to make his way inside.

No one's there, the two likely having gone to the dance. The one Warren wanted to go to so badly. When Nathan turns on the lamp and turns to look properly in the room his eyes immediately zero in on his varsity jacket hung on the chair at the desk. He can't help the disappointment that sinks in at the sight. Warren left it behind. Warren finally realized how shitty of a person Nathan is. Confirmed that Nathan is irredeemable. Deserves to be left behind.

He hates me. He hates me. He hates me.

But when he takes a step further into the room he notices the set of clothes laid out on top of the bed. Formal attire, by the looks of it, put out for Nathan beside a cleared space where Warren's had been. At least, he assumes.

An invitation.

Nathan touches the white collared shirt, lifting it up to check out the twill blazer beneath it. There's a matching bowtie, too, which is repulsive. But the thought that went into it… Nathan mourns the idea of not having been there when they were picking clothes out. All because he had to ruin things. Push Warren away, again and again.

It's valid, though. Because the thought of Warren getting too close…Nathan doesn't want to think about that again. But perhaps…going to the dance–spending one last night with Warren and Lou–couldn't hurt.

He changes into the shirt–disregarding the bowtie–and keeps his jeans, stepping in front of the mirror when he's finished buttoning up to the collar. Nathan would be lying to himself if somewhere along the way back to campus he hadn't already come to the conclusion that he's not going to stand up Warren at this stupid dance.

Now he just has to see it through.

-

There are a lot of people. The whole thing almost reminds Nathan of some themed Vortex Club party. Almost.

He makes his way through the crowd of people and into the gymnasium, peering around the dimly lit space to find Warren. Nathan spots him a little deeper inside, just off from where students dance. He's decked out in a mint green, frilly collared shirt with the same dark brown corduroy pants and a bowtie similar to the one left at the dorm room–because Warren would wear one. Beside him, Lou is wearing a long turquoise satin, puffy-shouldered dress.

Unlike most of the students, they stand idly. Warren's biting at his lip and turning his head in every direction like he's looking for something specific. Nathan wonders what it is, concern crawling across his skin.

Lou puts a hand on Warren's shoulder to force him to look at her. She says something that Nathan can't make out from the distance and the music that plays. Warren shrugs in return, not really reacting until Lou says something that makes him laugh, coaxing him out of his distracted state. She then takes his hands and starts moving his arms to force him to dance. Warren doesn't comply straight away, but eventually gives in when Lou lets go to start dancing on her own.

Nathan swings around the camera he still has with him, hoping he'd catch another moment just like this. He finds capturing candid images gives him a sense of fulfillment unlike the pictures he'd taken in the past. It's still art, just seen through a different lens. One he'd never anticipated himself looking through. He takes the photo, still far enough away where the two shouldn't notice alongside the sporadic lighting of the party. Yet Warren clocks it immediately, fixing his gaze on Nathan while ceasing all movement.

For a moment, Nathan is struck with panic. Maybe Warren didn't want Nathan to show up–

"You came!" Warren's barreling toward Nathan as if he's going to tackle him to the ground. But he stops just before doing so, almost skidding to a halt. "I was so worried, I didn't know when you'd come back or *if* you'd come back! I wanted to wait but Lou said it'd probably be better if I didn't just sit and wait around and that, you know, you probably needed some space. But I'm just, um, I'm really glad you came." Warren's fidgeting now, suddenly looking embarrassed. "Anyways, come this way."

Warren waves at Nathan to follow him back to where Lou is and she doesn't hesitate to put her hands on his shoulders, "looking quite dapper there, Nate." She flashes him a smile.

"You look really good, too," Nathan gestures at her dress.

Her smile widens, then she gives a little twirl, "why, thank you." Then she's giving both Nathan and Warren's arms a squeeze. "I'm gunna go check out the food they got here, cool?" Nathan watches as she doesn't wait for an answer and disappears into the crowd.

"What about me, how do I look?" Nathan's attention snaps back to Warren with surprise, having to stop his lips from quirking into a humoured smile when he notices how serious

Warren looks. Or, not serious but rather how he looks at him with wide, anticipating eyes.

Nathan presses his lips together, then narrows his eyes. He takes a step back and begins analyzing Warren in an over the top manner. “Hmmm,” he puts a finger to his chin, attention drawn downwards. He moves to cuff the bottom of Warren’s pants, straightening up once he’s done. “There. Perfect.”

Warren checks out his newly cuffed pants, blinking up at Nathan, “really?”

“What can I say, my fashion sense has finally rubbed off on you. I can’t be more proud.”

Warren laughs at that, “I have you and Lou to thank. You two will have to be my fashion consultants when–uh,” he cuts himself off, the moment growing awkward.

Nathan doesn’t want to let it get weird, so he’s quick to change the subject. “Hey, so what did you and Lou get up to today?”

Warren breathes out in relief, “we used the money that we, uh, *procured*, and got the rest of the materials we needed!” His eyes have lit up excitedly again, “the reactor’s basically done, thankfully. But I was thinking, tomorrow you, Lou, and I should go to the Two Whales for breakfast! I-if that’s cool. It’d be really nice to all go together. It’s really cool seeing it during this time because–” he laughs awkwardly. “I’m getting worked up about the diner. This probably isn’t the time to be going off about it.”

Nathan shakes his head, “you know, I saw this dog at the beach today that you would’ve loved. Nerded out over it and everything.” *Like he does.*

“You did!?” Warren presses his hands against his own face, devastated. “Fuck. What kind was it? Was it big? My grandma used to have this giant german shepherd that I used to want to ride like a pony when I was a kid. He was super cute and I begged my parents if we could have him once she died but his name was Max and so I’m kinda glad my cousin ended up getting him instead because when I met Max from school I thought about that and it would’ve been so weird if I had a dog named Max, too, and you know what it’s like when you adopt an animal, you can’t really rename them, I mean you *can* but it’s kinda too late at that point, especially if they know their name–”

Warren’s eyes grow wide, his pupils along with them and instantly Nathan’s heart stills. *What’s wrong what’s wrong what’s wrong* is all that repeats in his head as he returns Warren’s shock-struck and particularly serious expression. In the next instant, a smile breaks across Warren’s face and he grabs Nathan’s hand. Whatever Nathan had been expecting, it certainly isn’t that. He’s so caught off guard by the gesture that he lets it happen and watches as Warren begins to bounce excitedly on the spot. *“No. Way.* This is—I *love* this song! Come on!” He’s dragging Nathan toward the dance floor before he’s fully tuned into the music that’s playing.

Nathan knows this song. *Space Age Love Song,* a classic. He didn’t pin Warren as a *‘Flock of Seagulls’* kinda guy. Although, he’s come to realize that he’s never really known Warren at all. Not that Nathan had bothered to try to get to know him in the past, *God*, the last thing he wanted was to be on some level of speaking terms with someone like Warren. The fact

doesn't surprise him by any means. But… it certainly makes him feel…some sort of way. *Huh.*

Nathan…liked knowing something about Warren. Something personal. More than the few, very vague things he's picked up since being around him. Something more. Like he could almost pretend they were just two friends living in the eighties as if it is their reality, hanging out together.

They aren't. They could never be. But perhaps for a moment he can pretend they are. For a little while. *Friends.*

He realizes he's just standing there, completely still while his thoughts drift away. He doesn't want to think about anything, he wants to be carefree like Warren. So he gives in, just a little, tapping his feet along with the beat and swaying to the rhythm. He probably looks like an idiot, especially next to this guy, but there's no one here that knows him. Not any other students they know from Blackwell. Not his family. Not–

"You can do better than that, Prescott!" The strobe lights flash a spectrum of colour across Warren's face, illuminating his awkward dancing and the way he grins–all teeth and squinted eyes–while doing so. Nathan can't help but mirror the smile, daring to take a step forward as if to risk being pulled into his orbit. He wants to be, though. He wants to be pulled in. For so long he'd been pulling back. From everyone around him. The last time he'd trusted someone… *no,* he doesn't want to think about him right now. He doesn't want to ruin this moment.

It doesn't matter, anyways. Not when he's so far from it. Not when Warren's reaching for his hand again.

"Yeah, that's it!" Just as Nathan was secretly hoping he'd do, pulling so their arms are above their heads, then Warren's twisting into a clumsy spin underneath a little arch that their arms have created–forcing Nathan to take part in its execution before the awkward way their limbs have been bent into break them apart. It doesn't deter Warren in the least, who continues grooving away while Nathan just watches him. All lanky limbs and absolutely no coordination with his own damn feet. It makes Nathan smile, and then he's laughing, not able to withhold the built up joy from inside his chest. Even when it prompts him to hold his ribs and it hurts to breathe, he doesn't care. It's freeing.

Here, on this stupid dance floor with this stupid dork, Nathan could stay here forever. So Nathan rolls his eyes, pretending like he doesn't want to be coerced into this, when in reality he really, really does, and takes another step closer because he wants to do it again. Because he's never felt this alive. And they do, for the remainder of the song they just spin and dance and bump into each other. They're laughing all the while, lost in the flash of lights and in between their fingers momentarily intertwined.

Then there's something else, like a tightening that replaces the sudden release in his chest. It's restrictive, making it hard to breathe in a way that doesn't relate to the pain from his ribs but rather a shortness of breath. And Nathan feels like he's falling, falling hard towards something. Crashing, really, but not to the floor. His head is light and the room spins around him like the different coloured lights, making him dizzy.

It's a lot, and the happiness he's experiencing–if that's what it can be interpreted as–suddenly feels…wrong. It feels wrong.

It… was a mistake to come here.

Nathan's retreating a couple of steps before he fully comprehends what it is he is doing. It's not a dramatic movement by any means, but it still manages to catch Warren's attention. He instantly stops what he's doing, his features creasing with worry and Nathan hates it. He *hates* it. He doesn't know why, but there's a growing irritation at seeing the look of concern plastered on Warren's face and pointed his way. Or maybe it's from how everything had been fine just a second before. *Perfect*, even. Only shattering because he's pulling away from it. Rejecting it.

Why? Why!? *Why is he like this?!*

Warren takes a step forward, jolting Nathan like an electric shock. He reels back and Warren freezes. "It's fine, everything's fine!" Nathan calls out over the music to reassure Warren, or maybe it's to reassure himself. But Warren doesn't look convinced. "I'm just, um, kinda thirsty, I'm gunna grab a drink."

"I'll grab them for us!" Warren offers enthusiastically, not giving Nathan the chance to respond as he runs off in the direction of the drinks table stationed at the other side of the room. Nathan's left alone to idly stand under the lights that don't make him feel so good anymore. The room's still spinning, but he can't stay here. He tries, though. He tries to stay, but when a solid minute passes and his skin begins to crawl from restlessness, Nathan hightails it out of there. He blinks and he's outside, his legs having carried him away while his mind tries to comprehend what it is that's wrong.

It's dark. And cold. And Nathan accidentally bumps into a few people that still linger around. He's still dizzy, even with the absence of the flashing lights from inside. Everyone's talking, loudly, probably wanting to get away from all the noise inside, but creating too much noise here, too. A lot of them are drunk, leaning against the building or stumbling around, nursing bottles of beer in their arms like it's inconspicuous. It's overwhelming and all Nathan wants is to be alone. *Again. Like always.* So he runs. He runs through the crowd, not really knowing where he's going but knowing he has to get away.

Chapter End Notes

Hope ya'll enjoyed yet another overdue chapter~ 😌

It's getting closer and closer to the deadline of when they have to travel back eeeeeeee! Only one more day, will Warren be going back alone?!? 🥲🥲🥲 Who knows....

In all seriousness tho, I should only be a few more chaps away from finishing ahh! I'm so excited to get there and also kinda sad ngl, this has been so much freaking fun to

write and it's been so cool seeing it be received by ya'll 😭 thank you so so much for reading!!! I'll see ya'll at the next chapter!

Chapter 6: but I dared, be wanted

Chapter Notes

> Hellooooooo! Once again I am so so sorry for the delay in updating this fic… I promise you it is still running my life and taking up much of my thoughts (alongside my work which is kicking my ass atm) but I'm back guys, the next part is here! Finally!
>
> I've split this next part up, as it was meant to be the second last chapter, but it kinda got away from me and turned into a monster so now I've split it up to be two smaller chapters (so sorry, but hopefully that means the next update will be soon!)
>
> A little thing I want to add is that the song "Feel Good" by Matt Maeson really inspired the first part of this chapter and the song "Candles" by Daughter really inspired the vibe of the last part of this chapter, so feel free to give them a listen if you're into that sort of thing!
>
> I think (hope) that the contents of this chap will be enough to satiate ya'll before I can get out the next part, wink wink. I don't know why I say that as if it's not going to be sad as fuck. But it's still juicy. Maybe? I don't know anymore. I'm going to shut up now. ENJOY!

"Thanks!" Warren yells his appreciation into the face of one of the chaperones hosting the school dance in charge of the refreshments table. He can't help it, he's happy. *Nathan came back!* He takes the two cups offered to him with a broad smile, looking inside to see a red liquid Warren can only assume is some sort of fruit punch concoction.

It might as well be alcohol from the buzz Warren's experiencing, swivelling around to head back in the direction he'd left Nathan. He catches sight of Lou at one of the adjourning tables full of snacks and finger foods, who gives him a thumbs up. He nods in return, still smiling before marching his way through the crowd.

Shimmying his way around the cluster of students, Warren *swears* he already passed by the section of the dance floor he and Nathan had been. He continues orbiting the spot until giving up to walk around aimlessly for any sight of Nathan at all. Warren's mistaken disorientation slowly trickles into disquiet, stopping in the middle of the dance floor while still awkwardly having hold of their drinks in a quickly plummeting expectation that Nathan will just simply pop up.

Through the crowded dance floor, Warren catches sight of Argyle waving him over. He hesitates slightly before willing his feet to carry himself toward the guy. "Whadup Argyle, how's it going?" he asks at an acceptable volume over the music.

“It’s going as well as they want us to think it’s going, especially when you drink the punch!” As cryptic as ever, Warren has no idea what Argyle means when he yells in his face while still maintaining his mellowed-out demeanour. Warren doesn’t have the faintest idea on how to respond, only watching as Argyle takes one of the drinks from Warren’s hands, downs it, and proceeds to grab the other to throw back as well. “Your bro went that way.”

Warren looks over his shoulder in the direction Argyle is pointing to, straight to the doors that exit the gymnasium to the outside. He’s about to head towards them when Argyle puts a hand on his shoulder, forcing Warren to look back at him.

“Burgundy, bro. I see it now, it’s blended into you. You two share a deep connection, don’t take that for granted, my guy.”

Warren blinks, “uhh, thanks?” Argyle only nods before he floats off in the direction of the punch table wielding the two stolen Solo cups. But Warren doesn’t linger, he’s already heading out of the exit in search of where Nathan’s gone.

The elation he’d had is cut short now that he knows Nathan left. Warren doesn’t want to read into what it means. He knows what happened back at the gas station wasn’t the full story. If it had been, Nathan would have never shown up at the dance.

But Warren would be lying if what transpired then hadn’t hurt him. The animosity is one thing–Warren can understand the things Nathan says are often a reflex or some sort of defence mechanism built up over a long time–what really hit Warren was Nathan saying that he won’t be going back.

The forefront thought in his mind being… *why?*

He’d also be lying if the idea about Warren being the reason behind the decision hadn’t crossed his mind. He knows he can be a handful. He’s had to lessen who he is as a person in the past from certain friends because of his intensity, pull back because *Warren, you’re being a bit too much. Time to reel it back now.*

When first stepping foot into 1983, Warren couldn’t have cared less about what Nathan thought of him. *Now*, though… something in his chest tightens from the mere dichotomy of what Nathan might think of him now. So much has happened, so much has changed. It’s safe to say Warren finds himself caring very much. So the idea that Nathan might be pulling back because of him, far enough to refrain from going back to their own reality? Warren can’t help the particular way that stings him.

But that can’t be why, dude. Don’t be stupid. There has to be something more. Warren can’t hone it down to Nathan just being that special brand of asshole anymore. Not after the side of Nathan he’s been exposed to over the last few days. However reluctant that side has been to show itself.

If Warren is anything, though, he’s determined. And he won’t let Nathan run off again. Even if he refuses to talk to Warren, at the very least he wants to make sure he’s safe. So he struts outside, where it’s quite busy. A crowd of students accumulate the space, but after a quick scan Warren knows Nathan isn’t within it. Alongside a gut instinct.

The students surrounding the building grow sparser the more he follows along the path that leads to the main campus. Warren faces the direction of where the path leads back to the dormitories, though he has an inkling of where Nathan might've gone when he turns his body to the main school building.

-

Holding up a hand, Warren gently pushes open the door to the lab space. The same one they've been working in, light pouring across the linoleum and casting a spotlight in the far corner of the room where Nathan sits hunched over against the wall.

He looks so small, having pulled into himself so tightly. So compact. It's not surprising to Warren, if there is anything he's picked up about Nathan, it's that he's reserved. Closed off completely to the world around him, an exact image of what he sees before him now. Nathan had never wanted to be in the spotlight like everyone assumed. Looking at him now, Warren wonders if the only thing he really wanted was to be understood.

Warren stands at the doorway. He could give Nathan space, leave him alone like Nathan expressed wanting before. A simple 180 before walking right out of there. It would be easy.

He's closing the distance between them without further thought, sliding down on the lab bench adjacent to Nathan so their feet almost touch.

He lets the silence linger for a bit, observing Nathan who has his head buried in his knees that are brought into him, not having acknowledged Warren's arrival. It prompts Warren to knock his foot softly into Nathan's to try and coax him to look up, "hey."

"Don't. It's… It's all too much. Please just leave."

All too much? Warren fidgets with the cuff of his own shirt. He's not uncomfortable, he just has no idea what he means. Or what to say. It bothers him that he can't fix whatever it is that's been bothering Nathan so much. Warren's never been very good at connecting with people. *Things* –the reactor–are easy to fix. But people… what does someone do to ease another's pain?

Put it all on me.

That's what Warren wants to say, sitting here in the darkness with Nathan. Shrouded by it. *Well, you could put it all on me.* And he would mean it. The Nathan that sits here, alone, right now. The real Nathan he'd never gotten the chance of truly seeing until now. The pain, so raw, so obvious Warren wonders how he'd never noticed it before. *Ah, well.* Perhaps Warren is wrong in thinking so.

No, it was never obvious, he just didn't care to see. Nathan was good at that. Hiding. Always hidden by that angry passion he wields like a weapon. A damn good cover for scaring people

away, for displacing that hate away from himself. Aiming it at any and everything else. And Warren would take it if it meant Nathan wouldn't be alone. *Oh, you could put it all on me.*

But he won't say that. Instead, Warren will stay. It's the most he can do. The most Nathan will *allow* him to do. And that's good enough for now. Because alone is to become a black hole and together is sitting in the dark.

A dark where Warren's heart beats so loudly in his chest, he wonders if Nathan can hear it. Then he wonders if he can't because maybe Nathan's heart is doing the same. That there's only the two of them in the dark with their hammering hearts and their mouths left empty from nothing to say.

But Warren will try, because *damn it all.* He's never been any good at talking, but he'll try. And if it doesn't work–if Nathan chooses to only listen to him ramble and leave it at that, or tell him to shut up, well… then that's all Warren can do. And he'll continue to stay by Nathan's side if only to provide the smallest amount of comfort. To be of any use. To do *something.*

It's hard to pick something to break the silence, to begin the momentum of revving himself up to say something good enough. Something that means enough. Something helpful enough. Warren's fidgeting with his hands, so engrossed in what he might say that he almost jumps when Nathan speaks.

"I'm not a very good person, Warren." His voice is filled with emotion that's reflected on his face when he finally raises his head.

Warren immediately thinks back to what Max had said to him the day they got sent back in time, just after Nathan broke the reactor. That Nathan is '*capable of some pretty scary shit'*. He can't help but wonder, too, if this has anything to do with what Max had wanted to talk to him about that day. Whatever Max had witnessed Nathan doing in the bathroom that spooked her so much. How manic Nathan seemed when tracking her down to, what, threaten her?

That conversation–the whole interaction–seems somehow irrelevant now. A dangerous thought, perhaps, but Warren has a feeling that it's merely scratching the surface of something much deeper.

"In fact, I'd say I'm pretty fucked up…" Nathan whispers this part out, like he's admitting it for the first time to even himself. Because he then presses his lips together and looks at Warren with such devastation he knows the statement was never given voice to before.

And Warren is so overcome by the sudden urge–no, *need*–to reach out to Nathan. To touch him? Hold him? Press his hands on either side of his face so he might force Nathan to look at him properly? He doesn't know, but words don't seem to be enough. Words don't seem like they will reach him in the same way. Because he's never seen Nathan like this before, and that terrifies him.

Warren lifts a hand, the movement slow yet shaky with hesitation from overthinking it because he already anticipates Nathan flinching away from him.

“Don’t!” He says again, this time much more frantic than before as he pulls himself even tighter. Warren didn’t think it possible. “I’m trying to–you don’t even know who I am! What I’ve done!”

Warren frowns, “I do know you. Maybe I didn’t a couple of days ago, but I do now. Whatever’s happened, I’m sure we can–”

“*Ugh,* no!” There’s obvious frustration emitting from Nathan, now. Warren can sense that he’s struggling to put into words what he is so desperately trying to tell Warren. Like he’s holding back from what he wants to say. “I–” Nathan chokes, “I *hurt* people, Warren!”

The way he accentuates the word, so full of its own definition and cracking with emotion at its heightened octave makes Warren’s throat tighten.

“Don’t you get it!? I don’t *deserve* to go back!” His face twists in a way like he’d just come to that conclusion himself, underlyingly knowing it but never fully dissecting the confession. “I don’t deserve to go back.” More firmly stated. “I don’t deserve going to that dance with you–I don’t deserve whatever the*fuck* has been going on between us, you helping me, Warren, I don’t deserve *you!* ”

Warren blinks. He doesn’t know how to process what Nathan is saying, hung up on how *scared* he looks and never knowing just how little he thinks of himself. Or how much he’s come to value Warren.

“Stop looking at me like that!”

“Like what?” Warren blurts out.

“So concerned over *me*–like you’re worried for *me* –when you should be worried about anyone else, about yourself, about Rachel! Because it’s my fault, Warren–it’s my fault she’s fucking *dead!* ” Long streaks begin to spill down Nathan’s cheeks, catching the light as he angles his face away from Warren’s.

“What’re you talking about?” Warren stills, eyes wide and unblinking.

“I killed her! I didn’t mean to hurt her but it doesn’t fucking matter, I killed Rachel Amber!” There’s a strangled noise, something between a sob and frustration, that comes from Nathan.

“Nathan, I need you to take a breath and then I need you to tell me what happened,” Warren tries to put the words out delicately and steady enough to keep them from shaking, too. “Do you think you can do that?”

Nathan squeezes his eyes shut, shaking his head against a fist that he’s brought up to his forehead, elbow held up on his knees. But he complies, taking in a ragged breath. “I just keep seeing her. Over and over again. In the Darkroom.

“What darkroom?”

“A bunker–the Darkroom. My Family’s, it’s–we’ve had it in the family forever and I told Jefferson about it and we–I–he wanted to use it as a way to execute his vision, told me I

inspired him and said we'd–I never thought–" he chokes up again.

"*Wait* —Jefferson–the photography teacher? What did he do in the Darkroom?" Warren's moved a little closer, tilting his head to try and look into Nathan's face that he's so adamant to hide.

"*We* did things. He wanted subjects for his fucking–I–I didn't understand fully but he said it was art. He told me I didn't get it because I wasn't an artist like him but he could teach me and I fucking believed him because–*fuck*–and it's all my fault."

"What… did he ask you to do?"

"Find models, subjects. I would bring him people to photograph. I'd leave them alone with him. Then he started suggesting I bring people that have had too much to drink from Vortex Club parties, or–or people who wanted drugs. And I did. I fucking did."

"Was Rachel one of them?"

Nathan nods, "they were all girls–he said he only wanted girls until–" Nathan cuts himself off, pressing his mouth together until his lips completely disappear and his eyes are all scrunched up.

A chill runs along the back of Warren's neck, the exposed skin there crawling with unease. "Until what?"

"He showed me pictures of–of *me*. And I don't remember him taking them. I was with Rachel. And we weren't in the Darkroom, we were outside in this–this dug-up… *hole*–in the ground. And she was–she was–" Nathan stops, burying his face in his hands as he begins to sob. His shoulders hunch over further as it racks through his body in a violent movement.

"Oh, Nathan," Warren's enclosing his arms around Nathan's hunched form. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to say, so Warren holds him. He just holds him.

There's no rejection from Nathan, no pushing away while he does this. But there's no reciprocation, either. He doesn't bring his own arms up to wrap around Warren, he simply sags into the touch, cradled there.

Warren hopes it's okay, that he's not taking advantage of the vulnerable state Nathan is in, or that they sit like this for so long without moving save for the way Nathan silently cries and the involuntary spasms that come with it.

Pieces–of who Nathan is–are starting to fall into place. The recollection of their conversation from the night before, Nathan repeating Rachel's name during his nightmare, the way he lashed out at the gas station and the general way he approaches everything with so much reservation and anger.

It's horrific, the things Nathan said. The very restrained, sporadic version of his retelling of events. He still doesn't fully understand what it is that happened, but it's clear that Nathan blames himself for all of it.

The awful thing is—if Warren's being honest—seeing Rachel's posters around Blackwell always brought out a sense of hopelessness within him. Like a part of him and the rest of the school instinctively knew she was already gone. So he's not surprised when Nathan confirms this, yet the circumstance–Nathan's involvement, *Jefferson's* involvement… it brings to light the sinister motivation behind it in a way Warren could have never anticipated.

But it's how Nathan is so sure of it all being his fault where Warren holds reservation. People steer clear of Nathan at school. He *can* be scary. Impulsive, brash, unhinged. But he's not capable of this. Even if he did kill Rachel, Warren is positive he didn't do so knowingly. If anything, Nathan is the perfect fit for all this. The perfect type of person to be taken advantage of regarding to what has been happening in this 'Darkroom'. And if pushed–to be framed for everything.

Jefferson–Warren only knows him through Max. He's seen him the few times he'd visit Max in class just before having to leave for his own. The guy always came off as put together. One of those teachers who truly believed they were cool despite declining the fact. Consistently saying how much *'older'* and *'less with the times'* he is. A simple and harmless schtick. One that makes a lot of sense now. So calm and collected, dripping with charisma. The complete opposite of Nathan.

Max had always admired him, he knew that much. Gushed over his work and skill as a renowned photographer. He's sure Nathan did at one point, too. But Nathan's mention of him leaves a bitter taste in Warren's mouth.

After what feels like forever and also like no time has passed at all, Warren slowly unwraps himself from around Nathan's frame, careful like he's made of glass that might shatter if he moves too quickly. Nathan's still curled up, prompting Warren to reflexively reach out and press his fingertips against his cheek to gently pry away the hands that cover his face.

"Nathan," Warren closes some of the distance still left between them to force Nathan to look at him, his eyes refusing to, red and puffy. "It's not your fault."

Then they do, broken and blue, "it is."

Warren's heart squeezes. "No. It's not."

"You're wrong."

"Then tell me. Tell me everything."

And he does. After calming down somewhat, Nathan takes a moment before he tells Warren all of it. It's hard, Warren can tell. He's ashamed, averting his gaze for most of it. He's bitter, with how he clenches his fists at certain recollections. More than anything else, he's upset. Stopping at times from being overwhelmed. And all the while Warren listens patiently, letting Nathan take the time he needs to let it all out.

He speaks of Kate. A timid girl that he knows is a friend of Max's. Warren can sense the guilt that radiates off of him at her mention, expressing the desperate regret and need to rectify what happened.

He speaks of Chloe. Someone that, under different circumstances, Warren might've said was the perfect match in temperament to Nathan from how he describes her. She'd been eager to accept any offered drugs but was quick to wise up to what was going on and ready to turn it around as blackmail against him, as attempted in the girls' bathroom the day they'd been sent back in time.

He speaks of Rachel. The perfect subject, as Jefferson had put it. He was obsessed with her. A born star, promises of being the model she so desired. Overdosed, by Nathan's hand. Though the details on how are just as blurry to him. He has no memory except for what Jefferson accused him of.

He speaks of his and Jefferson's relationship. An inquisitive teacher who took a special interest in his photography. The only one, really, who showed any interest at all. That was enough to get the ball rolling. Someone disguised as a friend, someone Nathan admired and respected with promises of helping him truly hone his talent in exchange for Nathan's dedication. Then a few favours, some of his influence here and there as both a well-adjusted student and a Prescott. More and more. Money, time, influence, the Darkroom–a place to make Jefferson's twisted conception a reality, all while Nathan began to spiral–it was a fair price for the mentorship and faux bond Nathan was promised in exchange. Until it wasn't.

Until he's taken absolutely everything he could from Nathan and left him as a husk of his former self. Nathan doesn't say this, but Warren can put two and two together. Flashes of a completely dissociated and mad version of Nathan in the parking lot, eyes barely taking in what's before him. Desperate, and panicked… Warren sees it now.

"He manipulated you…"

"I thought he was the only one who really understood me."

The way Nathan looks at Warren when saying so, his eyes pleading like he's silently begging for Warren to believe him…but to condemn him, too. It's hard to witness. It's hard to see this version of Nathan in front of Warren now, so completely *vulnerable*. Everything pouring out, the facade washing off of him.

He's red. At most times a constant vibrant–resilient in temperament–but not a stranger to the various shades of the colour. Warren's been exposed to the softer, paler hues. Easy going like that of the sky just before the sun begins to set. Calm, but then other times like the spill of water tinged ever so lightly with blood left on the surface of a porcelain sink in an attempt to wash it away, so desaturated it's almost pink. It's stripped, so far from the colour it's meant to be. Not soft anymore but sad. A sad version of itself that no one will ever understand. Because red isn't sad.

He's red.

He's red.

He's red.

He's red.

Then he's a violent storm.

And suddenly all colour is ripped away to be of any relevance at all. He's just a fury, a ball of emotion so tightly wound up in hatred and hurt that Warren can see it now. Warren can understand. Warren gets it because he feels it bleed into himself.

He's angry. Angry on behalf of Nathan. Who, like everyone involved, didn't see the true insidious nature of what was going on. How alone he must've felt, seeking acceptance from the very person isolating him. No one knowing the horrific scene playing out just out of sight. But they will. Right in that moment, Warren comes to the conclusion that he is going to take the fucker down. He instinctively clenches his jaw at the thought, he's going to make him pay.

Warren leans away, not realizing the panic that clouds Nathan's expression until a hand clamps around his wrist. "Don't go!"

Betrayal, regret, shame, Warren doesn't know which is more prominent to flash across Nathan's face in the split second it takes for Warren to realize he thinks the anger is pointed at him. After everything Nathan just told him, it's obvious, and Warren wants to slap himself in the face for not being more mindful of it.

So he leans back in, letting himself be pulled forward by the hand that still holds onto his wrist in desperation, keeping his promise. *Put it all on me.* "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

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They did, *eventually*, end up going somewhere. But the sentiment still holds, Warren's not leaving Nathan's side. Nor does Nathan leave his, even when Warren insists on stopping back by their dorm to grab Nathan's jacket because the night's grown colder. Though, in truth he just misses wearing it.

So they do exactly that, expanding their evening plans–as alas, the night is still young–to return to the dance with the intention of stealing some snacks–shoved into Warren's backpack inconspicuously–before hightailing it out of there again. Warren has no idea where they're going, but Nathan seems to, so he just follows his lead.

They circle around the back of the school building, making it to a fenced off area. Nathan pries open a distressed part of the chain-linked fence with ease, motioning for Warren to enter.

"Where does this go?"

"You'll see."

Warren peeks past the fence, following the line of sight to a set of exterior stairs fixed to the side of the building. He knows it leads to the roof, making him hesitate, “Nathan, I don’t know if going to the roof is the best idea..”

“Oh my God, I’m not going to fucking throw myself off of it, okay? Vic and I used to hang out up here all the time. So chill out.”

Warren flinches at the brashness of Nathan’s statement, but proceeds inside. He waits for Nathan to do the same then follows him up the steel staircase. They smell of rust and Warren refrains from touching the worn railing as he ascends a step behind Nathan. He knows better than to voice his continued concern, aware the proclamation will land on deaf ears.

By the time they reach the top of the roof, Warren’s worry melts into a bubbling excitement. He peers over Nathan’s shoulder as he walks up right to the roof's edge to sit and dangle his feet off. Warren does the same, taking in the view of campus in a way he never has before. It’s not too, too high, easing some of the tension in Warren’s stomach from the drop and giving him the courage to follow Nathan’s lead in the first place. But it’s enough to see across the entire campus, past the football field and spot some of the buildings that make up their small town of Arcadia Bay in the cluster of trees that grow sparser as the bay opens up.

“*Whoaa,”* Warren breathes out.

“I actually thought you’d really like it up here.”

“It’s amazing, you can see everything!”

Nathan’s shaking his head, “yeah, but that’s not the main reason I brought you here.” Warren turns to look at Nathan with curiosity. And Nathan only smirks before leaning back to lie on the ground, staring straight up above him, “this is.”

Mirroring Nathan, Warren flattens down next to him.

The expanse of the dark, navy sky takes up his whole vision, dotted with the distant pricks of light and contrasted stars. There isn’t a single tree or building or street light that blocks his view.

“Holy shit…”

“Right?”

“Look at it all! There’s a totally noticeable difference to how bright everything looks during the 80s, that’s nuts!” Warren voices his awe, pointing a finger up. “I mean, look at Ursa Major. It’s freakin’ lit up like a Christmas tree!”

“Yeah, I figured you’d catch something like that. Nerd.”

Warren lowers his hand, sighing, “I just think it's neat.”

“I know. It is.” Nathan shuffles beside him. “I don’t know what any of it means, I know shit all about stars. I just like looking up like this and seeing nothing else. It’s like we could be

anywhere in the world right now. Like we could be in fucking Switzerland, for all we know. Looking at a sky that looks the same."

"Switzerland?" Warren angles a scrunched up expression towards Nathan, a smile pulling at his lips.

"Yeah, I don't know. Where would you want to be?"

Warren blinks, thinking for a minute without the ability of conjuring any specific place in his mind. "I–ah, nevermind. You'll laugh."

"Oh, come on! Now you have to tell me."

"You'll actually think it's so stupid, no."

Nathan shrugs, the movement a little awkward as they lay on the ground. "Pussy," he says under his breath.

"Yup. That's me. I'm a pussy, what can I say." Warren grins.

Nathan rolls his eyes, obviously bothered that the comment didn't do the trick. "Whatever."

Warren averts his eyes back to the stars, secretly content with exactly where they are. Not wanting to be any other place in the entire world. Under any other circumstance. Wanting to be right here.

He can't stop the yawn that overtakes him. Exhausted from such a rollercoaster-ride of a day. The satisfaction of that morning–almost finished with fixing up the reactor–to the downright devastation he experienced after Nathan left him at the gas station only to be filled with elation when Nathan showed up at the dance, to running off again. Like he's internally waging a war with himself almost constantly. But he's glad that despite it all, Nathan's still here with him.

He subtly eyes Nathan from at his side, gaze travelling down across the span of his profile before retreating to the sky once more. "How's your nose?"

Warren can see Nathan raise a hand to it from his peripheral before he answers, "it's okay. Still kinda sore when I touch it but not so bad anymore. I think those frozen peas did the trick."

"Oh, good. I still have them if you want to use them again. Don't think they're frozen anymore, though."

Nathan only snorts in response and the silence stretches out between them. It's nice, but Warren can't keep a lingering thought from looping back into his head. And as much as he doesn't want to voice it and risk ruining a night that has quickly become his favourite, he's itching to get it out. His trepidation begins to manifest physically as he starts to fidget in place and casts what he thinks isn't a noticeable side-eye Nathan's way.

“Yeah, Graham?” Nathan doesn’t bother turning to look at Warren, who’s taken aback by how he’d sensed something was up. But he supposes they’re past that now. Nathan’s likely gotten to know Warren as much–or even more, due to his self-aware transparency–than Warren’s gotten to know him.

“Um,” Warren clears his throat, suddenly nervous, “you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to… or can’t right now, but.” He presses his lips together, building up his confidence, “what were things like between you and Rachel?”

“Well…” Nathan hesitates briefly, “our families knew each other for a long time before we did. Her dad was the DA, and, you know, my family has its claws in this whole town. So they did a lot of business together. But we got pretty close pretty fast. For a time, we were inseparable.”

“You cared about her.” It isn’t so much a question, but Warren still waits for an answer.

“Rachel was everything.”

“Oh. So… were you two…?” His question fizzling out, Warren finds that he’s holding his breath somehow in strange anticipation of Nathan’s response.

“She was, uh… she was my friend.”

Oh.

“Rachel was a lot of things. Everybody knew her differently. I think there was a point in time when I knew her best and she knew me best. A chapter in each other’s lives. I don’t think anyone knew me the way she did, though. But she moved on. Because that’s what Rachel was like, you’re her whole world and then suddenly… you don’t even realize she’s somewhere else. With someone else.

“She needed me at one point in her life. Then she needed something else. Someone more than a friend, I knew I could never be that for her. We were still friends but everything changed. She changed, I changed. I still needed her, but she didn’t have the same energy for me as she did before. I could sense her shifting, turning into someone I didn’t recognize and I… did some stupid shit to try and keep her around. I thought I was helping her, but I should never have gotten her involved, I didn’t know what would happen, I never thought–”

He cuts himself off. A second passes, filled by three noticeably quickened heartbeats before he can hear Nathan let out a deep breath. “I can’t really remember everything that happened that night.”

Warren shifts onto his side to look at Nathan, his words gentle when he asks, “then how do you know it was your fault?”

“Because it was.” Nathan slowly sits up, and Warren thinks he might close up completely. Instead, he runs a hand through his hair and continues.“Because Jefferson said I did. He said I gave her too much at the Vortex party we’d been at and…that we both passed out in the

Darkroom. But I only had a couple of drinks, but I *did* pass out," he awkwardly states, furrowing his brow, like his brain is trying to recollect the events of that night with difficulty.

"I don't know why but sometimes I just… I don't know, I can't really rely on myself. Sometimes there are chunks of time missing and I can't explain it." He pauses, then, "the next thing I know I'm back in my dorm room in the same clothes from the party. I almost thought it was all a dream until he calls me to tell me we have to meet up. And when we do he's angry, telling me I fucked up but not why or how. Then he's showing me these photos of Rachel and he's telling me that she's gone. That she died because I gave her too much, and– and that I almost did the same to myself. That's why I was in those pictures with her. He took them to teach me a lesson, to humiliate me. And how they turned out so much better than he expected, he-he was *exhilarated* at how they turned out. Said I really pushed him to see a new angle. He only regrets letting me get too caught up in it all, and by extension, ruining his best subject. That's all she ever was to him, a fucking *subject."*

He's looking out ahead of him, but Warren can tell he's not focusing on anything. Staring hollow eyed, a million miles away. "I didn't feel humiliated, I just felt numb. I fucking killed her."

"No, you didn't. It was Jefferson, you *know* it was Jefferson." Warren's sitting up now, too. He's trying to get Nathan to look at him, but he doesn't.

Nathan lets out a strangled chuckle, so full of disdain. "It doesn't matter, Warren. I still led her down that path, she would still be alive if it wasn't for me. I doomed her. I might as well have been the one to bury her in the fucking ground."

It's not fair. Warren has nothing to give in terms of reassurance, it's frustrating, and all he can settle on is that everything–the whole situation–is unfair. It's fucked up, and knowing that this is what's been weighing on Nathan for the last few months makes the animosity–both to those around him as well as himself–understandable.

He hears Nathan let out another deep breath and lower back down to the ground. And again, Warren does so, too. This time defeatedly as they both lie side by side. He wants to scream, let everything out into the night above him because it's unfair. That something like this, something so fucked up… It shouldn't be happening, it shouldn't have *happened.* And all the anger, all the hate and fury and pain and torment that had emitted from Nathan since Warren first ran into him in that hallway a universe away, it's nothing compared to the acceptance that he senses from Nathan now.

That same person who he's known to punch first and ask questions later, blinded by resentment, the same for which he holds for himself. All those destructive qualities. But that's not all that makes up Nathan, Warren wants to grab him by the shoulders and tell him there's so much more. So much more than those destructive qualities. That he still knows how to laugh and dance, that he still has so much to offer from his young heart. As a person and as a *friend*. That he deserves to have a normal life. That he deserves to be alive. That he deserves to be happy.

How he still sees enough beauty to take photos of a world that has mistreated him so horribly. Slowly, Warren has seen Nathan open back up and perhaps even fall back in love with

something that seemed so irreparably damaged. To be himself again. Only for it to mean nothing at all.

“I’m really glad I got to know you, Warren.”

Warren turns his face toward Nathan, his cheek against the varsity jacket he lies on. He studies him. His side profile, gaze directed toward the sky beneath the somehow-endearing silhouette of his eyelashes. Expression relaxed yet open. Warren doesn’t think he’s ever seen him like this before. Heart sinking at the prospect that this could be the last night they share together. Nathan eventually mirrors the movement back at Warren, faces only a short distance apart.

“Please come back with me.” Warren whispers this, yet Nathan’s eyes widen as if he’d yelled it. “Please.”

Nathan doesn’t answer, and the shock that lights up his eyes slowly begins to fade into an expression Warren can’t read, but there’s pain. That much he knows. “Please,” he says again, not realizing how strained his voice has become and how the fabric lining of the jacket beneath his face has grown damp and irritable against his skin. *“Please, please, please,”* he quietly pleads, bringing a hand to Nathan’s cheek, fingers hovering only momentarily before gently brushing along the soft skin and following along the still-slightly raised lines there. “Don’t let him win. Don’t let him take you away, too.”

Without a word, Nathan’s own hand reaches out toward Warren, moving a strand of hair off his forehead before wiping a thumb beneath Warren’s eye and then settling on his face. Holding Warren the same way. Offering him everything but an answer.

Chapter 7: improve

Chapter Notes

It has been... a while. I am SO sorry, but I come bearing the second-last installment of this work, heh...

Now that I *mostly* have the last chapter finished and sorted out I feel a bit more confident posting this chapter (though I may come back to edit it, we'll see). Once again, thank you to everyone still reading and the ones that are joining this mess of a rodeo now!!!!! I cannot express the gratitude I have for the kudos and comments this is receiving, so thank you all so so so much :')

I'm going to leave another note at the bottom of this chap about some more song/music-related stuff that you can also totally ignore.

BUT ANYWAYS HERE WE GO. Time to check in with our boy Warren.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning comes all too soon, the night having gone by in a blur. Such as it goes. Warren wakes up feeling… strange. Knowing it's his last day stuck in the 80s before attempting to travel back home. This uneasiness knotted in his stomach doesn't come from the anticipation or worry over the feat. Not entirely. It comes from the fact that he can't convince Nathan to come back with him. And having run out of time to do so.

If only he'd known earlier. Or if there was some way of discovering this before they'd travelled. Before the storm, before the fight in the parking lot, before *everything.* What he would give to go back, *all* the way back. Before Jefferson ever got anywhere close to Nathan and the others.

Warren certainly considered it. The temptation to turn the dial to a date before anything happened. But he knows it's too big of a risk, not being able to voice the idea to Nathan, who he's sure probably thought of it himself. Both refusing to bring it up, like an unspoken agreement that it wasn't a possibility, as much as it hurt to admit.

Messing with time, well. It's dangerous. Warren doesn't even want to dive too deeply into their current circumstance. His mind likely to explode from trying to wrap his head around what being in 1983 might've contributed to the future already. To try to 'fix' what transpired before the events of he and Nathan's present in 2013? Warren doesn't need to go through loop after loop trying to change the future. It's chaos theory, you know, the butterfly effect and all. Living through the attempt would likely cause them more pain than actual help. And as selfish as it sounds, Warren doesn't want to put him or Nathan through that. *The choices they might have to make… the consequences with them.*

So it's with a dreadful acceptance that Warren starts his day, wanting to push it all far from his mind. But, despite it all, there's that little, *tiny,* bit of hope that still lingers. That perhaps it's not too late yet. That Nathan can be swayed, and that's what keeps him going. It's enough motivation to plaster a somewhat acceptable–and at the very least neutral–expression on his face when he and Nathan meet up with Lou at the Two Whales for an early start on their last day.

But even Joyce's prized smile and his favourite order of Belgium waffles can't raise his spirits, only managing a couple mouthfuls before he begins aimlessly poking at it with his fork, gaze downcast.

"Uhh, I don't think so. Warren'll be the deciding factor." Warren drifts back to the conversation at the mention of his name, focusing on Lou and Nathan as they eye each other competitively. "You don't think he'll agree with me?" Lou feigns a look of despair, shaking her head solemnly. "Sweet, unaware Nathan." She takes a long sip of the chocolate milkshake she has in front of her.

"What're we talking about?" Warren looks between the two of them, completely lost.

"Your friend over here thinks strawberry is the superior milkshake flavour," Lou throws a thumb Nathan's way with an expression like he'd just tried to convince her that the sun revolves around the earth.

"Yeah, cause it *is* ." Nathan crosses his arms and narrows his eyes, the expression so strikingly reminiscent of the version of Nathan Warren recalls before everything that it sends a chill along his spine.

The feeling only deepens when he clues into the fact that he's going to have to agree with Lou, and therefore disagree with Nathan. "Err, chocolate all the way, man… sorry."

Nathan tears his eyes away from Lou to squint them further, disgust curling his lip. Arms still crossed, he gives Warren a quick once over. "This explains so much."

Warren has to stop himself from bursting out laughing and he can see Nathan's expression has lessened somewhat, too, allowing himself the slightest quirk of his lips. Lou looks between them, shaking her head disapprovingly before she turns away from them and absentmindedly stirs her shake with her straw, "I don't know what you guys think is so funny, this is a serious matter." But amusement flashes in her eyes when she flickers them back to the boys' direction. "But onto *actual* serious matters, we've yet to figure out a way to divert the energy from the lightning strike to Warren's car. Which, if we don't do, then all our work will practically be for nothing."

Warren considers this. He had the idea of potentially finding a metal wire that they could lead from the source of impact–right on the bald head from the statue centering main campus–to where they'd situate his car.

When he shares his idea, Lou nods thoughtfully. "It's risky, but probably the best option we have as the point of impact is so awkward. We're lucky it'll be late in the day, but I'm afraid that as much as that means there won't be any students around to witness us doing this, there

is going to be campus security lingering about. And I have a feeling that messing around with the statue of Jeremiah Blackwell in the very middle of campus is going to be like lighting a beacon for them."

"We'll just have to be extra careful, then." Warren states, not wanting to dwell on all the things that could potentially go wrong with their plan.

"I agree," Lou blinks, fixing her gaze somewhere past Warren, no doubt already going over details in her head. A silence grows, the two of them determinedly lost in thought.

"I need to piss." Nathan announces spontaneously and tonelessly, straightening up from his seat so fast Warren almost jumps.

As he walks off to the direction of the bathroom Lou shakes her head, an air of amusement still about her. "He's a strange one."

"Yeah," Warren agrees lowly, though not being able to help the little bit of endearment that seeps into the response.

"Are you excited to go back?"

Warren looks up at her from his slumped position, having held his head in both his hands as his elbows rested against the booth table. She's gazing at him expectedly, her smile replaced by genuine inquiry and a hint of something that Warren can't quite pin. Though, it reminds him of how his mom would sometimes prod him back home when she was worried over him.

To the future, she means. He hesitates. "Yeah." *No.* The instant contradiction of the voice in his head comes as a surprise, almost like he'd been avoiding actually asking that question internally so he'd never fully admit it to himself.

She's unconvinced, Warren can tell by the way her brows knit together. But she doesn't say anything more since Nathan's walking back towards their booth and throwing himself across from Warren once more. They get the bill, which Lou pays without discussion, then they're leaving the comfortable coziness of the diner to brace for the contrast of the brisk fall air outside.

"Shotgun." Nathan bumps Warren's shoulder as they head back to Lou's car. Warren rolls his eyes, letting Nathan beeline it to the passengers seat while he bends down to tie his shoelace that's come undone. But instead of witnessing Nathan launching himself in the front seat like he expects once he's finished, Nathan's still waiting beside the car door. "Hey nerd, you good?" Nathan asks once Warren catches up.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." Warren drops his gaze, hand reaching out for the backseat door handle. Pausing, he lets go of it to set his gaze back on Nathan. "Actually, no. Not really. I can't stand the idea of going back to the future without you."

Shock registers on Nathan's face momentarily as he stares back. A beat passes between them, where that shock morphs into something else, something Warren can't decipher and just as

Nathan opens his mouth to speak Lou pops her head out of the driver's side window to peer over at them inquisitively, “everything okay? You guys coming?”

They don’t say anything. Then Nathan drops his eyes as he turns away, opening the passenger side door to duck inside. “Yeah…” Warren eventually answers once he’s inside the car, too. “Let’s go.”

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They end up splitting off from Nathan, who goes back to the dormitories to shower, while Warren and Lou continue back to the school labs for what is likely their last time. Warren finds himself hung up over all these ‘last times’. The last time he’d see the Two Whales in its prime. The last time he’d sleep in Lou’s dorm room. The last time he’ll routinely work on the reactor with the best lab partner he could ever ask for.

The last time he’ll see Nathan.

The hardest one to accept of all.

Nathan. Who has, against all odds, become his friend in the end. There is a twinge of something in his chest. Somehow the term ‘friend’ just didn’t feel adequate enough. It’s a gut-wrenching feeling, really, since it’s accompanied by the realization that if he would try to define it further, it would only hurt more. Because whatever it is that developed between them will be staying right here. Stuck in 1983. Forever.

So Warren doesn’t want to dwell on the thought, no–he outright *refuses* to think about it further.

But as much as he tries to push it all away Warren has a difficult time concentrating when Lou and him tackle what’s left with fixing the reactor. He finds himself struggling to focus his full attention throughout that morning. Even going as far as zoning out while working on it, sometimes–much to his embarrassment–during crucial conversations with Lou.

The saint that she is, Lou didn’t lose her patience when he’d ask her to repeat something, or when he–not once, but *twice* –dropped the pair of pliers he brandished when aiding her in lining the interior walls with the last of the new material.

Continuing to fumble into the afternoon, Warren adds it all up to his concern. His mind wholly and inexplicably taken up by a single thing. *Nathan* . But it isn’t just about his consistent worry over the fact that Nathan said he wouldn’t go back with him, leaving him behind. No, it was just simply…Nathan.

His presence, his attention. That smirk he’d point at Warren when he’d try to provoke him. His eyes, his hands, his hair. The jacket he gave to Warren so that he can breathe him in at all times. Notes of all the different scents that could vaguely be described as who Nathan is, but

aren't close enough to commit to. So Warren doesn't bother discerning them. He just knows he can't live without it anymore.

How–as much as Warren has been avoiding thinking about last night–something shifted between them. Something that could be traced right back to the very moment that Warren entrusted letting Nathan carry the reactor in his hands. The trust Warren hadn't realized he had put in him then, somehow further solidified after last night. Because that was the exact moment Nathan decided to return that trust.

And it's cruel, really, to have shared such a vulnerable moment together only for the repercussions to become as fragile as paper that he will have to shred to pieces in order to go back home. Repercussions that are, simply put, how Warren has never become so enthralled with another human being before. Completely and utterly invested in Nathan.

And just when Warren starts to wonder when Nathan will show up, the door to the lab opens as the very person saunters in, immediately sweeping his half lidded and dark-circled eyes to meet with Warren's. And for the third time that day Warren lets the pliers fall from his grasp, the disruptive sound of metal hitting the floor ringing around the space of the lab.

Warren instantly darts to pick them back up, embarrassed, his lab coat crinkling noisily as he does so and further cementing his humiliation.

"Hey," Nathan nods his head to Warren.

"H-hi," Warren stutters out in response. *What the fuck was that?!* A judgy voice that sounds way too similar to Nathan berates internally. Warren can sense himself turning red–from embarrassment, definitely from embarrassment–and swivels on the spot he's standing to focus his attention back to the reactor Lou's still busy with.

"Hey, Nate," she calls to him with a small wave of her hand. And then he's rounding the lab bench to walk into Warren's direct line of sight again, precisely the opposite of Warren's intentions when originally turning away.

But he's there. And Warren has no choice but to witness in silent horror as he crosses his arms and begins pulling his sweater– *Warren's* sweater–up and over his head, exposing the skin of his back as the shirt he wears underneath rides up with the motion. Warren's drawn to the spot, until his shirt falls back in place, almost hanging off of him, really, and Warren tunes in that it's the *Grease* shirt he himself had been using as a pyjama shirt.

Warren's eyes widen. He doesn't know why he's so taken aback by the image. It's not *his* shirt. It's Lou's. And yet he continues aiming his dumbfound reaction with increasing obviousness at Nathan as if this second layer of clothing that Warren has worn himself is somehow scandalous.

Quickly fixing his face, Warren sends what he hopes isn't a super noticeable side-eye at Lou who's stationed across from him on the other side of the bench. She's still transfixed by her work, to which Warren wastes no time shifting his attention back to Nathan. His hair is still a little wet from his shower, reminding Warren of how it had looked the day they'd first travelled here. The natural texture of his dirty blonde hair starting to come through as it dries.

Some droplets that cling to the ends threatening to let go, and when they do they prove to be just as distracting as how they'd been on that first day after stepping out of the storm.

Nathan looks really good.

Warren tears his gaze away, pretending to be busy with a couple of tools that are laid out on the lab bench in front of him.

Nathan's *always* looked good, though. He's always been attractive, objectively so. Warren's always known that. He supposes that's what makes a popular guy like Nathan so popular… *right? Is Nathan even popular?* Warren *assumes*. Because he's part of the football team and knows *sooo* many people. Not to mention his involvement with the Vortex Club, and whatever exclusive club within that club he's a part of. So it's easy to conclude how that, along with his obvious looks, makes him desired.

Okay, cool. So why is Warren so hung up on it? *Yup. That's Nathan Prescott. He's also kind've an asshole. But not as much of an asshole as originally presumed.* They've moved past that, and with all the acquired context, Nathan has turned out to be a completely different person from what Warren initially assumed. Therefore all of this factors as a reasonable enough consequence to Warren being internally occupied over the subject matter that is Nathan Prescott.

But, like, he looks sooooo gooood.

Warren lifts his gaze again, settling on Nathan across from him, now loitering on the lab bench adjacent to the one Warren and Lou work at. He's always had those pronounced cheekbones, sure, but since when did Warren start paying so much attention to his neck–

"...did you want to take a break?" Lou leans into Warren's frame of view.

"Huh?" He blinks, focusing on Lou's tilted head across from him.

She quirks an eyebrow, looking over her shoulder at Nathan, then back at Warren with a slightly amused expression. "We've been going nonstop, it's okay if you want to take a break and hang out with your friend for a bit. I can take over."

"Oh, n–no, it's fine. Today's the last day, we should take advantage of every minute."

"There won't be any point if your brain is too fried, Warren." Warren gawks at her, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. *Is it that obvious?* "You've been working too hard, taking breaks is important, too. We're basically done, anyways. All that's left is reattaching the door," Lou clarifies.

"Ah, right," Warren only reddens further. "I mean–are you sure? Because I can focus, I swear."

She rolls her eyes, motioning Nathan's way with her head. "Go on."

-

“So where are we going?”

Warren pushes open the door of the main school entrance, holding it for Nathan and craning his neck to look over his shoulder at him. After triple checking it was okay with Lou to take a break–who insisted–and quickly shedding his lab coat, the two of them were on their way out. “I told you, I just wanted to take a break. And I’m hungry. We’ve been at it since this morning.”

“We driving?”

“Yeah,” Warren steers them in the direction of the parking lot, hyper aware of the fact that this is the first time it’s only the two of them since last night, if he’s not counting the very brief morning they shared before meeting up with Lou. Which he isn’t.

Silently, they walk across campus until descending the few steps into the parking lot. “Can I drive?”

Warren comes to a halt in front of his car, his eyebrows raised in surprise when he looks at Nathan, “Uh, sure, yeah.” He lightly tosses the keys he already brandishes in his hands, Nathan catching them effortlessly.

“Where to?” Nathan looks at him expectantly once they’re sat inside.

“Well, I felt bad extorting Lou of any more money *sooooo”* Warren twists himself in an awkward position so he can get to the wallet in his jeans pocket, fighting against the seat belt he’s already fastened. “I still have, like, twelve bucks left and was thinking we’d pick up some sandwiches from the gas station?” Nathan’s gaze drops to the few crinked bills in Warren’s hand. “Um, I mean, if that’s okay with you,” he adds.

“E-Z Gas it is,” Nathan confirms as he starts the car and begins shuffling around to rearrange it to his liking. Then he’s pressing random buttons that even Warren isn’t familiar with, the irrational fear that his Chevy might explode causing him to latch onto Nathan’s arm to stop him.

Nathan doesn’t react, but Warren jolts and releases his hold a second later, the motion having been instinctive. “What are you trying to do?”

“This thing have any music?”

Warren flips it over to the CD that he has in. It’s a mixtape he’d made himself featuring a bunch of his favourite artists–ironically from the 80s–that he had the intention of lending to Max. He never ended up mustering up enough courage to do so, with how intimidating her music taste is. Giving her a thumbdrive full of cult classic films seemed an easier bet, especially since she’d expressed an interest after that one time they’d nerded out over just about everything they’d ever watched for 4 hours straight.

Nathan rifles through the mixtape, one hand on the steering wheel as he maneuvers onto the street, the windows already down due to a brightly shining sun that's had the afternoon to turn the interior of the car into a sauna. Warren welcomes the cool breeze that flows in, enjoying the sensation of the sun against his face that he knows is fleeting with the storm bound to roll in later that day.

The sporadic sound of the first few seconds of a variety of songs abruptly stops when Nathan backtracks to one he likes. The familiar upbeat synth tempo of *Take on Me* by *a-ha* blasts through the dinky speakers of Warren's Chevy and flows out of the windows when Nathan dials up the volume.

Talking away
I don't know what I'm to say
I'll say it anyway
Today's another day to find you
Shying away
I'll be coming for your love, okay

Warren almost thinks it's a joke, trying to read Nathan for any indication that he's mocking Warren's choice in music. But he can't find anything to suggest he is, instead all he sees is how he leans back, one arm draped over the steering wheel. His hair all over the place from the wind in a way that Warren could never replicate himself because it just looks so cool. Almost reminiscent of a frontman to a band of the current century they're stuck in.

But most surprising of all is his expression. No ounce of fear nor furrow to mark his usual scrutiny. And even with the consistency having faded in the last couple of days, Warren doesn't think he's ever seen Nathan this at ease.

So, needless to say
I'm odds and ends
But I'll be stumbling away
Slowly learning that life is okay
Say after me
'It's no better to be safe than sorry'

He doesn't know what to make of it, doesn't want to think too deeply that this is the manifestation of his acceptance to stay. And Warren doesn't know if he's hurt more by the fact that Nathan is likely experiencing this sense of freedom for the first time in a long time or that he's already so readily accepted a life where he'll never see Warren again.

Or, perhaps, Nathan is simply enjoying a single moment of uninterrupted bliss. Something that Warren is quick to want to join in on. The comfort of listening to a favourite song while driving with the windows down. The laziness of the sun hitting the skin of his arm as he props it up on the window. The current company they share. As if for a second they can hold onto a life that sounds so much more promising than the one offered. Like there is a better end to the story they're getting.

"Oh, things that you say
Is it a life or just to play my worries away

You're all the things I've got to remember
You're shying away
I'll be coming for you anyway"

Warren didn't realize how he'd started to sing along, lowly, but he's not alone. He sees Nathan's lips move along with the words. And before they know it, Nathan's turned it up even louder and the two of them are shouting alongside each other. Hitting the high notes as a duet, both out of tune but neither of them bothered enough to care because their chests hurt too much from belting it out.

"*Takeeeeeee on meeeeeee,*

Take. On. Me.

Takeeeeee meeee onnnnn!

TAKE ON ME.

I'LLLLL BEEEEE GONEEEEEE

IN A DAY OR,

TWOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

They're both breathing heavily when the song finishes, the silence filled by the rapid intake of air for only a second before they exchange a look of understanding and Nathan presses the back button on the radio console to start the song over again.

Warren almost urges Nathan to forget the gas station and tell him to just keep driving. For another couple of replays of the song? For the rest of the evening? Forever? He doesn't know, but he doesn't want it to end. The hunger in his stomach protests to the idea, so when the same *E-Z Gas* station they'd visited to get the frozen peas comes into view, it's with much reluctance that Warren brings up a hand to turn the volume dial down.

They park and go in to grab their sandwiches and some bottles of Coca-Cola, this time passing on the peas. When they return to the car with their stuff, they unsheath their sandwiches from the red and white checkered paper they're wrapped in and scarf them down sitting on the hood of the car in silence. Leisurely, they sip on their drinks until there's nothing left to preoccupy themselves with.

After a minute or so passes without breaking the silence, Nathan slips off the hood of the car. Warren has to suppress the panic that rises from within him when he does this, brought back to the last time he'd done the same maneuver. But Nathan's not running off, no hint of frustration surrounding him like last time.

Warren watches as he, instead, makes his way to the backseat to pull his sweater back on then come back around to where Warren still sits on the hood. Nathan shoves his hands in his pockets, fixing Warren with his stare, "let's walk to the beach."

Before Warren can respond, his body answers for him and he's jumped off. "Okay."

-

The steady sound of the waves crashing on the beach can be heard before the trees open up from where they walk to reveal the expanse of sand. There's an ethereal look of sunlight behind dark clouds that threaten to rain, casting everything in a weird lighting that almost looks artificially improved. Warren's acutely aware of the beginnings of the storm that is bound to hit Arcadia Bay soon enough and bring them the lightning bolt to take them home. *Him* home.

They take their time walking toward the water, their steps awkward from the uneven sand. Warren had been hoping for a chance when it would just be the two of them again, trying to gather the courage to say something that's been on his mind ever since Nathan told him about everything that happened.

He suddenly stops, looking up from his feet and telling himself now is as good a time as any. "Hey, um. I'm gunna try and stop him, you know."

Nathan stops, too, only a couple of feet from where the tide reaches. He wears a confused expression when he looks back at Warren.

"Jefferson, I mean. I know you're going to tell me not to because it will be dangerous but I can't let him get away with everything he's done to those people–and to you–it's not… it's not right. I'm going to expose him, he'll be caught for what he did." It was true, it had been a consistent thought throughout Warren's mind. Jefferson can't get away with it. And Warren will do everything in his power to stop him. "My friend's mom is a lawyer, so that will probably help. And I'll obviously be super careful, I won't get involved but I'll talk to the right people who can investigate it. We'll find that Darkroom you mentioned and–and he won't be able to hurt anyone ever again."

Warren's wringing his hands together nervously. Nathan isn't facing him anymore, not saying anything as the silence begins to stretch out. Warren's worried he's breached the already delicate subject. Almost wonders if Nathan might turn to him in anger or pretend he has no idea what Warren is talking about. To discredit everything from last night due to regret in his state of vulnerability, as if to say it were a mere fever dream Warren conjured up.

Without facing Warren, but instead with his body angled away to face the beach, his gaze distant, he says something in such a low voice that Warren almost misses it, so close to being lost to the waves that crash on the shore. "I never thought there would be anyone who believed me."

It takes a second for the words to reach Warren, for him to fully understand the weight behind them. Said so quietly, so calmly as if it lessened their severity. But it's devastating to hear,

remembering how distressed Nathan had been when he found him the previous night. Wild eyed and frantic and so scared in his confession to Warren.

Nathan finally turns himself to Warren, his expression taut as though he's calculating everything Warren just said. "I don't even need to ask you if you mean it. 'Cause I think I already know you do."

"I do. I mean every word of it." Warren has to try to keep his voice from wavering from the sudden sense of overwhelming emotion that overtakes him. Of course he'd meant every word. Nathan deserves that. And Warren tries not to think how it will sort of feel like avenging him. Because even if Jefferson goes down, he will have succeeded in bringing Nathan down with him, as far as he knows.

"I know." Nathan repeats, offering a small smile that's quick to slip away again.

They watch the waves for a little while, Warren finding a strange comfort in the way it steadily lulls and crashes onto the bank. The water darkening the sand as it soaks in, before fading away.

"I've… actually been thinking…" Nathan casually holds his hands deep in his sweater pockets, kicking some of the sand they stand on with the tip of his shoe.

His eyes dart to Warren, who can't help but stare back widely with increasing anticipation and a failed attempt not to make himself sound too hopeful when he lets out a breathy, "yeah?"

Nathan's eyes skirt away again, and Warren almost thinks he'll drop whatever it is that he was going to say. Warren wants to curse himself for his inability to act–for lack of a better word– *chill* .

"I…um… *fuck.* " Nathan tries. And Warren frowns. It's not unlike Nathan to act frustrated, but if Warren didn't know any better he swears Nathan almost seems… apprehensive?

"I–" Nathan tries again, articulating with his hand out in front of him now. Trying, but met with more frustration at his attempt to get the words out. He sighs, dropping his hand and making a strangled, choking type of noise. "And I–"

Warren is having difficulty hiding an expression of increasing amusement, his mouth turning into a smothered frown. It's definitely a sight to behold Nathan like this. He's got both his hands in front of him–a development–like he's invisibly force choking someone. It's very reminiscent of Anakin Skywalker in *Revenge of the Sith* , the episode of which he's at the height of his tormented attractiveness, in Warren's opinion. The comparison makes Warren internally reel back, always having fixated on Episode III Anakin.

Huh. Warren is fully frowning now, not having anticipated the rabbit hole his thoughts are sent down as some things seem to click into place for him–and at such an inappropriate moment.

He pushes the mental Venn-diagram comparing Nathan Prescott and Anakin Skywalker–and what it might mean to him–far from his mind, *very* far–however difficult it may be–to focus back on Nathan and his continued struggle, apparently not having noticed Warren's own mental freakout. Thankfully.

"Look. Okay." Nathan runs a hand through his hair, seemingly collecting himself somewhat. "I was pretty dead-set on staying here, to not go back, but… but things… *everything* has changed. And honestly–I couldn't give a *fuck* about going back, at all–but now, now… you won't be here for much longer. And when you're gone I–And for so long I've been alone and I've been fine with that cause–cause it's all I've ever known! And I don't know if that's what I–I… *fuck!"*

He's pushed his fingers in his hair again, this time the action is frantic, forcing his head back to look at the sky. Warren blinks, taking in Nathan's freakout which seems so oddly familiar because–

Nathan's eyes grow wide, his expression slightly lax as if something's suddenly dawned on him, "This is your fault! You've rubbed off on me, oh my God. I'm fuckin' doomed. I've turned into you–"

Something escapes Warren–he can't help it–too late to catch it before he realizes it's a laugh that he's let out. And in that instant Nathan reels on him, latching onto the gesture. His eyes are dangerously narrowed as his face screws up again "are you–are you kidding me right now?"

The way Nathan looks at Warren, like he could ignite him just from how his gaze burns into him somehow makes Warren crack up even more, he's clapping a hand over his own mouth and trying hard not to double over. "Nonono, I'm not I'm–" but any attempt of lying is squandered by Nathan getting right up into his personal space and taking hold of his arm to try and pry it away.

"Are you seriously laughing at me when I'm trying to admit I have feelings for you?"

"I'm sorry! I swear I'm–wait, you what?" Warren's dumbstruck, eyes wide and mind completely and utterly blank. It's Nathan's turn to smirk now and before Warren can blink or react in any way or absorb anything that Nathan said, the space between them–that he didn't realize had grown so close in proximity–is closing, until–

Nathan's lips crush against Warren's in a flurry. Chapped and warm, the sensation so foreign Warren doesn't know how to react. It's only for a moment, but Warren instantaneously feels *everything* . Tasting him, it's bitter, the desperation, the hope, his breath against Warren's skin. And just as fast as it happened it's over, breaking apart from each other with a jolt.

They both stand and stare at the other, breathing heavily, before Warren's reaching out to grab Nathan's face and force their mouths back together. He has no idea what he's doing, or if it even remotely qualifies as anything real, his mind briefly thinking of how Nathan is probably *way* more experienced in this department, but shoving the thought away just as fast because he doesn't care in that moment, he just knows he wants more, *needs* more. He's greedy for it and Nathan seems to be just as eager. Impatient, yet so engrossed that there is no need to be.

No need to rush but not being able to help the desperation that so completely consumes them.

Warren has no idea how much time has passed when they separate from each other again, but it comes with a need for air and a sudden question that jumps from his tongue–

“Does this mean you’ll–?”

“Yeah, nerd, I’m with you. We’ll go back together.” Nathan says, sort of exasperatedly, his hair array and what Warren notices is a growing smile that braces his lips. Real and whole and directed at Warren. It reaches his eyes in a way that makes them squint. So foreign to Warren but so full of *life* , bringing colour to cheeks that aren’t as gaunt or sallow as they once were.

The already heightened elation interpreted from the warmth in Warren’s own cheeks and chest spreads further as a grin widens across his face to the point where it’s almost painful. He compares it to the dance and how he’d felt when he saw Nathan standing in the middle of the dancefloor after showing up. All dressed up, camera pointed, face full of trepidation, and showing up for *Warren.*

It makes his heart do a little flip, the realization of what this feeling he’s feeling is. And unspoken, he knows it’s exactly the same way that Nathan feels about him. All hesitation and doubt gone. That if there’s anyone in the entire universe that he’d wanted to see in that moment at the dance it would be him. That if there is anyone in the whole world he’d end up stuck with travelling through time it would be him. That if there is anyone to be trapped in an impossible situation, Warren’s glad it ended up being him.

Words can never describe how Warren feels about the circumstances that led them to this exact moment, however fragile and carefully constructed this moment may be. And he knows he wouldn’t change it for the world.

The feeling Warren’s experiencing must transfer physically–perhaps directly beaming off of him and directed straight at Nathan–because next thing, Nathan’s pushing a hand against Warren’s shoulder to knock him backwards, though with no real force. “Alright, ease up.”

But they’re both still smiling like idiots and Warren can’t tear his eyes away from Nathan, the wavy hair that dances across his forehead from a wind that’s picked up around them. How the strong sunlight that threatens to lower beneath the layer of storm clouds casts him in such perfect lighting Warren wonders if his mind might be playing tricks on him by dosing this particular moment through rose-coloured glasses, as if he’s growing nostalgic over it already.

Warren could bask in the happiness that emits from Nathan forever, rooted right to this spot. But he doesn’t have to. He won’t have to mourn this moment because Nathan is coming back with him and they’ll make many more moments like these.

“Come on, I’m ready to leave this fuckass place.” Nathan states eloquently and swivels where he stands, shoes digging into the sand further, before he begins trudging his way back up the beach.

“Yeah, me too.” And this time Warren means it.

-

Warren’s never been so aware of the way the sun slowly begins to set. Maybe not since he was still a young kid mourning the last few weeks of summer break before having to go back to school. The feeling wasn’t completely different from this, but at the same time it felt like nothing before.

It’s bittersweet, to say the least. The way the water in the bay pulls the sun down until swallowing it whole and dosing the small town into another star-filled night, putting an end to their last day.

“Hey nerd, you gunna help us or are you having a moment?”

Warren’s stood planted on the grass in the middle of the main campus, having zoned out from the view that cascades down to the horizon on the water. He spins around when Nathan calls him out, sending an apologetic and lopsided smile at him and Lou situated a couple feet behind Warren. “Sorry!” Just can’t believe we’re here already…”

Here meaning a mere hour away from when they’re supposed to travel back to the future. No big deal.

It’s started to rain, only sparsely, but enough to confirm the storm that is headed their way. Nathan has his hood on, pulled far over his hair so Warren can only make out the deep scowl he wears on his face. He holds up an umbrella to cover Lou, walking backwards together as she uncoils a thick copper wire from the spool in her hands leading from where they’d secured the end of it to the campus statue’s head.

“Here,” Nathan’s shoving the umbrella he wields into Warren’s hands after he lightly jogs to catch up to them. “Stay with Lou, I’m going to go grab the car and move it to the right spot on the main road.”

Their fingers brush, Warren hesitating with a response. He can’t explain the uneasiness that settles in his stomach at the idea of letting Nathan out of his sight, like something awful will happen in the few minutes they’re apart so close to going back.

“It’s okay,” Nathan says, low so only Warren can hear him. “I’ll be right back. I promise.”

Warren can only nod and watch as Nathan turns his back, “Wait!” Warren calls out, prompting Nathan to face him again. “I want to say a proper goodbye. To Lou. With the three of us.”

Nathan and Lou only stare at him for a second. Then Warren’s outstretching his arms, holding them wide, “Come on, bring it in.” Lou complies and so does Nathan, though not as

willingly. But their enthusiasm is quick to change once they're all in each other's embrace, the grip they hold tightening as the realization that this is it dawns on them.

I'm going to miss this. Warren doesn't have to say it, and neither do Nathan or Lou. He can sense it the same way as if they did. They'd somehow managed to grow so close after such a short amount of time. The same could be said about Nathan and Warren, but it won't be the same without Lou. And after everything, all of their work to get to this exact moment… a part of him doesn't want to leave this behind.

They break apart and Warren clears his throat. "Well," he focuses on Lou before sending a fist toward the sky. "Don't you, *dun dun dundundun,* forget about me…" he sings off-key.

Lou, in return, looks between Warren and Nathan with vague concern and total lack of understanding of what she is witnessing. "Uh…"

"You know, Breakfast Club *?* Wait, is that not out yet?" He points the question at Nathan.

"*Oh my God."* Nathan rubs a hand across his face, not even able to look at Warren as he angles himself away.

"Oh. Nevermind." He cringes internally. And probably externally, his face scrunching up with embarrassment. "It's a really good movie, though."

"Okay, I'm going now," Nathan begins to trek across campus in the direction of where they'd parked Warren's car in the school lot. He may not have been able to handle the overbearing sentimentality, but Warren could swear he heard a sniffle escape him before he disappeared.

Lou, on the other hand, struggled to get back to unspooling the wire, her eyes glassy. "You can't just make me cry and then leave…" she mumbled out, busying herself again.

By the time they spooled all the way to the campus' edge and down to where the sidewalk meets the road, Nathan pulled up alongside them. The rain had picked up significantly, causing Lou to almost slip down some of the grass that's grown muddy, Warren shooting out a hand to help stabilize her.

"We gotta get going!" Nathan calls over to them above the steady shower as he exits the car and slams the door, "a security guy was eyeing me when I left the parking lot and I think he's headed this way!"

"Shit," Lou curses, squinting from how the rain beats against the umbrella. "This isn't as inconspicuous as I'd hoped and It's going to be hard to explain exactly what we're doing. I have a feeling '*a science project for Mr. Wells' class* ' isn't going to fly. I have an idea, but I'll have to make a move right away–"

"–Wait, Wells as in Principal Wells?"

Lou falters, "Mr. Wells becomes principal?"

"Guys–"

“Right, not the point.” Warren rushes the words out. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’m going to cause a distraction in the dormitories, it should buy you two enough time!” She pushes aside the sleeve covering up her watch, “you have less than 15 minutes, it’ll be fine.” As reassuring as her tone is, she can’t hide the worry that flashes across her eyes when she meets them with Warrens.

And Warren recognizes that this is it. “But you won’t make it back again.”

Lou shakes her head solemnly. “No.”

“So this is goodbye, then.”

“For now,” her voice is soft, as is the smile she gives him. “I’m sure you’ll be seeing me very soon.”

Warren mirrors the expression. She’s right of course, it will be as if no time has passed. The same can not be said for her, though. Lou will have to wait 30 years before they’ll meet like this again.

“Thanks for–for everything,” Warren stutters out. “I don’t think we could have done this without you. You’re, uh, the coolest mom in the world. But you’re also a great friend. The best, really.”

Lou’s mouth, which is now pressed into a thin line, is set into a frown like she’s suppressing the urge to cry. She wrings her hands around the umbrella handle, fingers turning white with strain. “I’m… I’m really proud of the kind of person my future son has turned out to be.”

They hug again, this time properly and not as awkward as before. When they’re finished she hugs Nathan, too. “I’m glad you two have each other,” she says to him, causing him to look away. “Now I’m really going to go, before this somehow gets weirder.”

She waves over her shoulder at them as she darts away in the direction of the dormitories, angling the umbrella against the harsh wind and rain. The boys waste no time turning their attention to the car where Warren begins wrapping the wire around the antenna at the back while Nathan holds his varsity jacket above them to help shelter against the aggressively growing downfall of rain.

When Warren’s finished he wipes aside the hair that sticks to his brow, checking the watch that Lou lent him. “Okay we have 9 more minutes until impact, let’s get in the car!”

But as Warren straightens back up, the wire that had been pulled taut suddenly goes lax. The copper material seems to flicker, the reflection of the streetlight above catching the droplets that fall from it. Their attention snaps to one another as an understanding passes between them that the wire has come loose on the other end.

Before Warren can say anything, Nathan beats him to it, “I’ll go, you stay!” He yells as he’s already whipping the jacket around himself to pull his arms through.

“But–”

“There’s no time! Get in the car and start it,” Nathan flings the car keys Warren’s way, who instinctively encloses a fist around them in the air.

“I–I caught them!” Warren stares at the palm of his hand in disbelief.

“Proud of you, bud,” and then Nathan’s gone, swallowed by the sheet of rain as he sprints headfirst into it.

Warren has no choice but to dart around to the front of his Chevy and fling himself into the driver's side, forcing the keys into the ignition and starting the engine.

The precious few minutes they have left that creep by in Nathan’s absence are torturous. Warren waits apprehensively, fingers wrapped around the steering wheel in a vice and his free foot tapping with impatience. *Come on, Nathan, come on*. His eyes are glued to the passenger’s side window, barely able to make out anything from the rain that distorts the glass.

Warren chances a glance at his watch. 9:58. *6 minutes.*

With nothing else to occupy him, he tries to look through the sheets of torrential rain that aggressively roll over the car and make it almost impossible to hear anything else. He squints, his heart giving a jolt when he sees a flash of red before it’s gone again. A quick glance at the car's digital clock tells him 3 more minutes. The anticipation is killing Warren, making him instinctively reach across the passenger seat to yank open the side door. He doesn’t care when the inside of the car is instantly drenched, all he cares about is if Nathan will be back in time.

The downpour is deafening now, and visibility has barely improved after opening the door. “Nathan?” he tentatively calls out. There’s no response, until he hears a muffled sort of grunt somewhere in the distance. Before he can call out again, there’s a flash of lightning far off– not the one they’d been waiting for, but close enough to momentarily light up the setting Warren looks out to. And to Warren’s utter horror, the still image of Nathan grappling with someone on the ground instills itself into his vision. It’s as if he caught a momentary glimpse of a picture taken with flash to paint the scene in front of him.

Someone’s yelling, and though it’s hard to make out, Warren knows it’s not Nathan. “Did you really think I’d let you get away after what you fucking freaks did to me?! You’re dead! And your friend is next!”

The tips of Warren’s fingers go numb as he feels the blood drain from his face and hands, realizing who it is that has stopped Nathan from getting back, tackling him to the ground mere steps away. “Nathan!” Warren cries out, automatically beginning to crawl across the passenger seat.

“No!” He hears Nathan shout, “don’t! Don’t leave the car!”

Warren freezes, looking back out to where he can see the blurred mass that is Nathan and his father rolling across the soppy grass. A quick glance at the car's interface reads 10:03. One minute. “But I–I’m not leaving you–!”

“It’s fixed! It’s fixed, Warren–you can– *ugh–”* Nathan lets out another grunt and Warren knows he’s been hit again. There’s a scrambling that can be heard mixed with the downpour and for a brief moment Warren can make out Nathan’s form back on his feet again, booking it toward the car. Warren stares wide eyed, holding his breath when Nathan gets closer and–

He’s back on the ground, his father’s arms wrapped around his legs to take him down again, landing face first. But he’s so close that when he whips back his head Warren can see his face. His pupils are blown out and he looks terrified.

“Give me your hand!” Warren calls out, thrusting his own toward Nathan. Nathan doesn’t hesitate when he complies and reaches up. They’re so close, and Warren stretches as far as he can, until it hurts, until his ribs feel like they might expand and break from the pressure, until the strain is almost unbearable. Their fingertips brush and Warren begins to wrap his hand around what he *knows* is Nathan’s own.

Please please please please…

But all sensation is lost when a blinding flash and *boom* takes up all of him. Squeezing his eyes shut, Warren clenches his jaw hard as he braces himself, the air on fire around him. And just as fast as it happens, it’s all over.

Chapter End Notes

Every single chapter for this fic has been named after song titles or lyrics from Daughter's album 'Music From Before the Storm' (which was made for lis: before the storm heh) and the songs and lyrics have also inspired so so so much of the writing itself, it's a beautiful album (whether you relate it to grahamscott like your truly or not lolol) and I highly recommend checking it out if you haven't before!!

I also have a disgusting amount of grahamscott playlists I've made over the duration of writing this fic that I might post some links to (I use apple music but I'll make them for spotify too) if anyone wants to check 'em out *finger guns*

Thank you for reading!!!! I'll see ya'll in the next and FINAL (omgomg) chapter for this!!!

Chapter 8: friend, make sense of me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence that follows is almost painful. It's the first thing that Warren notices, followed by the tight grip he still holds. He slowly opens his eyes–which he still held tightly shut until the realization had dawned on him–opening his fist to…

Nothing.

Nothing but the slight *hiss* that starts from the time machine in the back seat signalling that it's fried once more, the acidic smell that comes with it, and a deep rooted dread in his chest over what he is trying with all his willpower not to accept.

"...Nathan?" Warren lets out delicately despite already knowing there won't be an answer.

Sunlight pours through the windshield, illuminating the empty passenger seat beside him. It didn't work. Nathan isn't here. He didn't come back with Warren. Warren's mind is blank from shock. Not being able to fathom that Nathan's not here, that shock slowly turning into disbelief. *No*...

He had hold of his hand. Felt the icy chill of his fingers. Can still feel the way their skin brushed against each other. *Nonononono.* Warren brings up his hand in front of his face, still wet from the rain. The faint thought of it all being a dream squandered as he rubs his fingers together. No, it wasn't a dream.

His mind suddenly starts racing. He drops his hand and peers over the steering wheel to look at the ground in front of his car in hopes it will be like it was the first time. That Nathan will be lying on the asphalt there. But there's no red lump like before.

Warren defeatedly falls back against his seat, forced to look at the bright and beautiful sky across the totally normal-looking parking lot. His gut twists sharply when the idea pops into his head that maybe none of it actually happened, and that instead of Nathan being stuck in the 80s without him and with no way of returning he *is* actually here. In 2013. As if nothing happened. As if everything just reset. And even though he'd be back, he'd also be unaware of everything that transpired in those few short days they'd shared.

As selfish as it sounds, the possibility scares him more than anything else. Because Nathan wouldn't know everything they'd shared. How… how he felt about Warren. And how Warren felt about him. Because everything still happened for Warren, it was *real* .

It's *stupid* and *irrational* and *inconsiderate* for Warren to think that would be somehow worse. If Nathan is here, unaware and still… *resenting* Warren… then at least Warren can still try to help him and– *fuck, what does it matter!? You're grasping at straws, Warren! Nathan's gone, "he's fucking gone! And he's not coming back and it's all your fault!"* Warren

blinks, not having noticed his thoughts were given voice halfway through thinking them, pounding the steering wheel with his fist. His eyes stinging.

It's cruel. To have been so close. For Nathan to finally want to come back, only for the choice to be ripped away from him in the end.

He digs the palms of his shaking hands into his eyes that he's squeezed shut again. *If there had only been more time. If only Nathan's father hadn't shown up. If only he wasn't such a coward and left the car to help Nathan. If only Nathan stayed in the car instead of him.* Warren could go over all the *'what if's'* and berate himself forever as he sits there.

Running his hands down his face, he turns to the passenger seat once more with futile expectation that Nathan's somehow popped up and giving Warren his usual judgmental stare with an insult ready to throw his way.

He'd give just about anything for that to be the case.

The seat is still empty, except–to Warren's surprise–it isn't. He hadn't noticed it before, too caught up in Nathan's absence to realize the small film camera left behind in his place. The glare of the sun outside reflects off of the small lens, making him wonder how he missed it in the first place. Nathan must've thrown it in the car before leaving to fix the wire.

Warren tentatively reaches out to pick it up, holding it out in front of him. It's all he has left of Nathan, the memories it holds the only reminder of what they once shared. He places the camera back down, his fingers shaking so aggressively he's worried that he might drop it.

This can't be happening…

Call it an intuition, but he's unconvinced. There's no way Nathan's not here, *his* Nathan. The Nathan he knows. Not when he'd finally accepted a second chance. Not after everything they'd gone through.

His immediate instinct is to check his phone, even though Warren's gone almost a whole week without it. But it's dead, because *of course* it's dead. He should've known that, considering he had no opportunity to charge it once it died a day into travelling back in time.

Even if—by some chance—his phone was working, he realizes he doesn't have Nathan's number. It makes sense, why would he? But there was something so strange about their quick and close acquaintance that made it seem equally as strange and somehow wrong that he doesn't know it.

He doesn't need it, Warren thinks to himself. They've spent the entirety of being stuck in 1983 by each other's side, Warren will find him again.

Putting his mind to work, Warren tries to recall what exactly he'd been doing at this moment in time on October 7th. The day they'd originally been sent back in time and that he and Lou had set the dial to in preparation for going back.

The car's digital clock reads 12:56. He would have been just about to leave class. That was shortly before he ran into Nathan in the hallway. He'll be around, he *has* to be.

So with newfound determination, Warren launches himself out of the car. He has to know. Has to be certain about the possibility that Nathan's not here. And if he is, but he doesn't remember everything, Warren will make him. He'll force him to listen as he explains everything that happened and how he knows about Jefferson and the Dark Room and the promise he'd made regarding it all. It'll be difficult, almost impossible, really, knowing how Nathan was before they'd travelled back in time together–but Warren will find a way.

He's zooming across campus, eyes peeled for a red varsity jacket and flash of dirty blonde hair. Aware of how crazy and wild-eyed he must look with his hair all over the place and his clothes still wet from the storm, Warren pays it almost no attention. A couple people look at him with interest, but he's flying up the steps to the main building before they can ogle him further.

The hallways are packed with students, and Warren doesn't slow his pace when he sends a frantic look at his watch before rounding a corner. *1:00, I was just leaving class now, that means I might–*

Warren's internal rambling is promptly cut off when he collides heavily into something, no, some *one*– with a slight squelch–sending them crashing to the ground with an exasperated ' *ouf'* . Warren is quick to reel around,"Sorry, I'm–!"

"Watch it, freak!" Warren's looking down, wide-eyed, as he sees Nathan lying there and smiling up at him.

"Nathan!" Without thinking, Warren flings himself down on top of him. They knock into each other so hard that Warren's shoulder hits Nathan in the face and Nathan accidentally elbows Warren in the eye. But they both don't seem to care as they've crashed on the school hallway floor, Warren having thrown back his arms in anticipation for their collision and instantly tightening his hold around Nathan just to make sure he's not a figment of his imagination. "You're back–you're here! And you remember me? I thought maybe you'd forgotten–"

Even with their awkward entanglement, Nathan's still smirking after pulling back from how he had his own arms wrapped around Warren. "Are you kidding me? How could I ever forget about you, Graham."

There's a cluster of students surrounding them now, all circling around as they survey the scene below them. Some of them cast worried glances Nathan's way, as if they expect him to explode and start chomping at the bit. Warren can almost cry from how very far from the truth they'd be.

A deep "*ahem"* sounds from behind the two of them, cutting their reunion short. "Mr. Prescott… Mr Graham," Warren's name is said with a slightly questioning tone, but an unmistakable tone nonetheless. Both boys stiffen at being addressed and Warren immediately clambers off of Nathan to look up at Principal Wells. He looms down above them, his expression particularly stern. "Both of you. My office. Now."

“But we weren’t doing shit!” Nathan immediately protests, a fresh scowl hardening his face.

“Care to explain Mr. Graham’s eye then?” Wells retorts, and Warren instinctively brings a hand to the eye that Nathan elbowed in their excitement. It’s already tender to the touch, making him wince. He has no doubt it’s already beginning to darken, cursing himself for how he bruises to the equivalent of a peach.

“It was an accident, we didn’t–!”

“And I suppose Mr. Prescott’s nose is an accident, too?” Wells now points the question to Warren, who cowers under his direct gaze. “Enough, I will not repeat myself again. Go on.”

Nathan, whose nose is still suffering the recurring repercussion of the latest fight with his father, prods his fingers just above his lip with curiosity. He pulls his hand away from his face to examine the fresh blood that’s started to trickle out and Warren stares in horror. He hadn’t meant it, obviously, but the fact that he was still responsible leaves him ridden with guilt.

He’s about to say something, but it dies in his throat when he notices Principal Wells still examining them with an increasingly impatient gaze. Warren doesn’t need to be told a third time, he scrambles up from his position on the floor, eyes downcast to avoid looking at their principal any longer.

“This is bullshit!” Nathan, on the other hand, has difficulty complying, wiping away the blood with the back of his hand aggressively. And it’s not until Warren grabs hold of his arm that he relents enough to back down. Wells doesn’t even seem to notice, back to taking his long strides down the hallway in the opposite direction.

“I will see you both shortly.” He doesn’t so much as glance over his shoulder when he tells them this in a booming voice. The school secretary is already waiting for them at the end of the hall when they turn around. She eyes them over her glasses with a disapproving stare and a shake of her head as she gestures them into the office.

“Oh, snort shit, Mrs. Webber,” Nathan says as they file inside one after the other. Warren gives her a strained, apologetic smile that comes out as more of a grimace when she lets them inside, but it does nothing to rectify Nathan’s crudeness. He supposes that’s fair.

There’s a split second of silence after the door closes behind them where they stand–dripping onto the carpet of the office in their equally soaked state–before they turn to one another. Warren grabs Nathan’s arms on either side of him, still not believing he is physically here in front of him, “It worked!”

“How did it work—?!”

“I don’t know, but we made it!”

“Yeah we fuckin’ did!”

They're both beaming at each other, until Warren tunes into the fact that he still has hold of Nathan and promptly lets go. He lets out a nervous cough and takes a step back. Nathan's seemingly already distracted, though, as he starts walking around the office like he's looking for something.

"What's up?" Warren asks, watching him walk over to the window behind Wells' desk.

Nathan unlatches the lock, then slides the window up, "Let's get the fuck outta here."

"Wait—shouldn't we stay? Wells will probably be back any second."

Nathan pauses what he's doing to point a flat expression towards Warren. "You really want to stick around and explain what actually happened? What do you think he is more likely to believe, that the two of us got into a fight or that we travelled back in time where my own father beat the shit out of me after we stole a bunch of money from him and trashed his room?"

"Right…" Nathan has a point, he realizes. A very valid point. "But, uh, isn't it too high? How're we going to get down?" Warren nervously tries to peer out of the window where he still stands at his position near the door.

"We're on the ground floor, genius," Nathan replies as he lifts a leg up, then turns to face Warren, "you coming?"

"Oh, right—yeah, I knew that," he feels himself turning slightly red before hurrying over to Nathan, "yup I'm coming."

They climb out, Warren getting stuck in one of the bushes outside that Nathan has to pull him out of unceremoniously. Once they're free, they skirt their way across campus and head in the direction of the parking lot.

Warren doesn't know why, but his legs carry him that way more than his brain makes the decision to. Nathan doesn't suggest to go anywhere different and before long both of them are back to sitting in Warren's car.

The silence engulfs them both when Warren is the last to shut his car door. For a second they don't say anything, not facing one another. Until–

"That was *crazy–"*

"I'm hungry."

Warren looks over at Nathan in awe wondering how he always manages to be hungry and how it always predeceases importance above all else.

"What?" Nathan fixes Warren with a stare, "I'm a growing boy."

"Yeah, but–" Warren shakes his head more in fondness than in disbelief, wondering how after everything that just transpired in the last couple of hours Nathan could be hung up over something so insignificant. But Warren supposes a little normality is appreciated when he can

barely wrap his own mind around any sort of explanation for coming back when the situation was already batshit to begin with.

He's grateful, there's no denying the immense relief at knowing Nathan managed to come back with him in the end. It does little to stop him from being caught up in the logistics of it, though. Or how their return home comes hand-in-hand with the complete *other* issue that is Jefferson. How they are going to deal with that now that it's become much more of a reality, Warren doesn't know. But he meant it when he told Nathan he's going to do everything he can to stop him.

It's just the *how* and the *when* that have been plaguing him. Every time he lets his mind linger on the subject for too long his head starts to hurt. Part of him is still trying to catch up with everything Nathan's told him. To think of how scummy Mr. Jefferson always seemed to Warren and how that does not come close to what he would describe him as now. Knowing he was behind something so much worse, pulling the strings of some grand scheme all while in a position that greatly suited him.

How close he is to all those people, to Max who idolizes him. To Nathan who did, too. To every other kid who might think the same thing. The thought alone makes Warren's heart rate quicken, like there's a weight on his chest that won't be removed until Mark Jefferson's been stopped–

"Stop thinking."

Warren whips his head toward Nathan, not having realized his plunge into his own thoughts, half expecting Nathan to look pissed off. But he'd said it softly, expression somewhat lined with empathy.

"Right, sorry."

"I get it. But let's just…" Nathan shrugs, averting his gaze ahead of him, "get our bearings straight and then we can revisit all that stuff later." And it's like Nathan knows. *Of course* he knows. He's probably the only one who understands because it had been him dealing with this for *weeks* whereas Warren has only known for a couple of days.

"Yeah, you're right," Warren breathes out, for what almost feels like the first time since coming back.

He's not alone in any of this, either. A vital detail that Warren is aware was the opposite case for Nathan, who'd been so isolated through all of this and who is probably putting on a braver face at the very moment for Warren's sake.

There's another minute that passes where neither of them say anything else. Nathan's still staring ahead through the windshield and Warren brings his hands up to idly wring the steering wheel. "So, you're hungry? I was actually supposed to go home for the weekend, from what I remember."

It's true, the idea of having time to work on the reactor a distant memory but not completely forgotten. But in truth, and what he fails to mention to Nathan, is that he was actually pretty

eager to see his mom. True, Nathan is likely to understand and perhaps even share the sudden urge to see a familiar face. Though, Warren is still too reluctant to bring it up. Just in case.

“Wait, are you telling me you’re not going to march back into the principal’s office and beg to be let back into class?” Nathan feigns an exaggerated look of shock, before a sly smile pulls at his lips. “Warren Graham, skipping school. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” Warren replies tonelessly. “I think the unique circumstances allow for our poor punctuality.” Though, he can’t help the fleeting thought about the possibility of what Nathan said being a real option, quickly pushing it from his mind when he feels silly for actually considering it.

-

Before they know it an hour’s passed, and they’re driving a little ways outside of Arcadia Bay to Warren’s house. It feels almost as if no time has passed at all, a commute that Warren’s always found quite timely suddenly seeming like nothing in Nathan’s company.

They don’t talk much at first, Nathan resuming his role of car DJ as he filters through Warren’s CD collection and complains about not having an aux cord to show Warren some of his own music. They also make sure to open the windows in an attempt to air out the reactor. It helps to dry their still damp clothes from the storm, too, chasing the high noon sun, grateful for the way the direct sunlight warms them.

It hits Warren at one point to ask Nathan where it was that he popped up after travelling back to the future, curious as to how and why the Time Machine spit them out in seperate places.

“I was back in the girls’ bathroom.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah… I think it’s where I was at the time.”

Warren eyes Nathan at his side to find his expression unreadable. “Did, uh, Chloe show up?”

Nathan shrugs, “I don’t know, I didn’t stick around. I left to find you.”

-

It’s a ways into the afternoon when Warren turns onto the street where his childhood home sits, slowing the car as he pulls up to the familiar house with its giant oak tree that shades the front porch and the red door that stands contrasted to the orange brick on either side.

Warren tries not to feel self conscious about how unimpressively suburban it must seem to Nathan, not looking his way as he parks his Chevy onto the driveway. They exit the car, both of them a little more stiff than when first entering it, and shuffle along the short footpath leading to the front door.

Adjusting his backpack onto his shoulders, Warren stops when he hears Nathan suddenly halt a couple of paces behind him.

He turns to make sure everything's alright, brow raised in question when he sees Nathan staring past him. His expression is struck with obvious hesitation and as though he'd just realized something. "We're going to see Lou. I mean—your mom."

"You can call her Lou," Warren says softly with a slight smile. "She wont mind."

But Nathan's shock turns to apparent nervousness and Warren has to turn back to the door to stop the endearment he finds at Nathan's reaction manifesting physically. His heart doing a type of flip inside his rib cage at the prospect that Nathan cares.

"Come on," Warren casts one last look over his shoulder—Nathan setting him with a firm nod—before grabbing hold of the door handle and pushing inside.

"Mom?" Warren calls out, shrugging off his backpack to place at the bottom of the staircase he passes and walking further into the house. Nathan lingers at the front door while he peeks into the kitchen. "*Mom??* " he tries again

He's halfway between deciding whether to go check to see if his mom's car is parked in the garage when the screen door to the back garden slides open and his mom pokes her head inside, "Warren? You're home?"

However much Warren had mentally prepared himself to see the version of his mom he was most familiar with, it still hits him harder than he expected.

He blinks at her, rendered speechless, and she smiles at him. Something about the way it pulls her features is so strange yet comforting and the gesture alone is enough to make it seem like she hasn't aged at all.

Then her features contort with worry as she grabs ahold of his face, "Whoa, what happened to you?"

Just then Nathan comes up beside Warren, and Lou looks to him with vague surprise, before returning her attention back to Warren with sudden understanding. And it takes all of his willpower to fight against the unanticipated sting behind his eyes and lump of emotion swelling in his throat as something glints behind her eyes and she comes to the conclusion, "Oh, I see. You're *home."*

The way she says it, so full of warmth like greeting an old friend after having been apart for so long, sends Warren launching himself into her arms. It knocks her back a little and then she's laughing, returning the hug by wrapping her own arms around him. He's glad for the excuse of hiding his face into her shoulder, which he's almost positive conveys pretty much

everything he's feeling at that moment. Then, just as fast, he's jumping away from her again, aware of how awkward it is with Nathan just watching the two of them.

She's smiling again, but it's aimed expectedly towards Nathan now, "Does this mean we can finally start having Nate over for dinner, then?"

Nathan's just as shocked as Warren, if his wide eyes are anything to go off of, picking up on how he's blinking quite forcefully a moment later. And Warren can't blame him for the way he remains quite reserved once the moment's passed and Lou goes into the kitchen to grab them some ice for his black eye and Nathan's nose which have long since been forgotten, only tuning into how sore his eye is now that his mom had pointed it out.

The two haven't gone long in each other's acquaintance without sustaining a consist string of injuries. At this point Warren's convinced that Nathan's face is more familiar to him beaten and bruised as much as he's sure his own contused appearance must be to Nathan. It's ironic, and as foolish as it all is he can't help but smile at how stupid and funny he finds it.

He's still thinking about it a short while later from his spot at the kitchen table across from Nathan, Warren watching him watch his mom as she's preparing some dinner for them. And the reservation reflected in his eyes begins to melt away when it's obvious that once Lou gets talking, she hasn't changed much at all. She's still the same Lou they'd seen yesterday.

He visibly begins to relax, lowering his guard as his shoulders grow less hunched and he finally takes notice of Warren's attention on him, meeting his gaze. "What?" He asks Warren in regard to the goofy smile he still has plastered on his face while looking at Nathan.

"Nothing. It's nothing," he shakes his head, but doesn't manage to shake off the grin. Nor does he want to, saying nothing more as Nathan goes back to listening to Lou while she cooks.

He could get used to this.

Now that they're not in constant imminent worry over trying to fix up a busted time machine to travel back to their reality, the mundane image of Nathan being a part of a regular family dinner at the Graham household is a welcome sight. Strange, *really* fucking strange. But comfortable. To a degree Warren never considered liking or wanting so badly before.

Lou whips them up a mean stir fry, enough for the three of them plus a bowl set aside for Warren's dad for when he returns home after work. Nathan and Warren practically inhale the food placed in front of them the moment it touches the table. And all conversation is brought to a halt as they eat.

With his hunger sated, the exhaustion that overtakes him is almost instant. He rubs his hands over his eyes, noticing Nathan fighting to keep his eyes open, too.

Lou gets up, taking their bowls before they have a chance to stop her. "You two look like you're about to pass out, why don't you go upstairs and try to get some sleep, hmm?"

Warren blinks, watching her as she gets up from her seat, "Are you sure? We can help–"

She chuckles, “Yes, Warren, I’m sure. I think travelling through time qualifies as a good enough excuse to opt out of doing the dishes.”

It’s weird hearing her say it so casually, but she has a point. And Warren can’t say he isn’t relieved at the idea of crawling upstairs and passing out in his bed.

“Go on, get some rest, you two.”

Warren stretches out his arms, then gets up from the table, Nathan hot on his heels as they make their way upstairs. It’s not until Warren is wrapping his fingers around the doorknob to his room that he’s suddenly struck by the fact that Nathan’s about to walk into his bedroom. The bedroom he’s had since they first moved here when he was 7 years old…

“Uhhhhhhh.”

“What?”

Warren peers over his shoulder at Nathan, still gripping the doorknob. “I don’t remember the last time I cleaned my room so I *don’texactly* know what state it’s in right now–”

“Warren, I couldn’t care less about all the nerd shit you got lying around in there.” Nathan tries to grapple for the door.

Warren relents, “Okay, okay!” He shoves Nathan aside and opens the door, bracing himself a little. Nathan walks past him, stopping after only a couple of steps to take his room in.

“Damn, you really are a nerd.”

Similar to his mom’s dorm room, there are books everywhere. They scatter around every surface, some stacked on the floor, too. But unlike his mom’s dorm, the room also acts as a time capsule into Warren’s life growing up. There are dusty science trophies standing on top of his dresser, not to mention countless medals that hang all bunched up beside them. A giant cork board is full with photos, ticket stubs, receipts, assignments he’s particularly proud of, and practically anything else that you can put a pin in.

All the shelves in the room are completely covered with his action figures–some of them still in the box–or old science projects that have ceased to work, or CDs and DVDs–some of them titles he’d rather avoid having Nathan see (*Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* never fails to make him cry). There’s also his 12-sided Rubik's cube–the *‘Megaminx’*– the handful of DnD dice he has strewn about, some of them most *definitely* on the floor and likely adding to the many tripping hazards around his room. There are clothes pretty much everywhere except in his closet or laundry hamper, and to top it all off, his bed isn’t made.

Warren’s already picking up a shirt, pair of pants, and a few issues of *Spider-Man* comics off of the floor to throw onto the chair in the corner of his room where his desk sits, “ *Oh God,* I haven’t been home in ages. Just–ah–disregard this stuff.”

But Nathan’s distracted by one of the photos hung up on his corkboard, holding onto the corner with his thumb and index finger, “I didn’t know you played soccer.”

“Oh, that was from forever ago. It was the only sport I didn’t totally suck at.” Nathan doesn’t say anything further, wordlessly moving around his room to examine all the different things surrounding him. Warren watches him, growing slightly unsettled at how exposed he feels. He focuses on making his bed and once he’s done Nathan plops himself at the end of it.

Warren just stands there, looking at Nathan who stares back at him, all exhaustion dispelled from his body. It’s kinda very weird. Then Warren remembers he’d forgotten his backpack downstairs, telling Nathan he’ll be right back to go grab it.

The next second he’s flying down the stairs, bending down to loop his arm through the strap of his backpack when he gets to the bottom of the staircase where it still sits. It’s just as he picks it up that Lou comes by, “You must be pretty relieved to be back.”

“Yeah! I am…” Warren falters a little, the fleeting thought of Jefferson crossing his mind. He’s turned to head back up but lingers on the banister, swinging from his arms in his indecision. Warren faces his mom again, who looks up at him patiently like she knows something’s on his mind. “Um, actually, now that we’re back, there’s something pretty important I need to tell you… it’s about Nathan. And it’s a lot, but I want it to come from both of us, if he wants to be there for it… And I want to make sure I don’t miss any details cause it’s important, mom. I already said that, but I just–I really think we can use your help. I don’t want to put Nathan through it right now, so…so maybe we can all talk tomorrow morning?”

He has to force himself to stop the word vomit before it gets too overwhelming, yet Lou only puts a hand on top of Warren’s that’s still gripped tightly on the banister. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes–I think, for the moment. I’m just glad Nathan’s here…” Warren drops his gaze.

“Does he need a place to stay?”

“Maybe, yeah,” Warren sighs out, grateful in that moment to have a mom as understanding as she is. He can’t even imagine what Nathan’s relationship with his parents is like if the situation got as bad as it did. To not be able to turn to anyone out of fear… Warren saw what his father was like at their age, and though some of it could be blamed on immaturity due to age, what he saw didn’t seem promising for the type of person he’s likely grown up to be.

“He can stay for as long as he needs,” She gives his hand a little squeeze, “and you can tell me anything, Warren.”

“I know.”

It’s her turn to hesitate, looking up at him with concern creasing her brow. And Warren knows it must be difficult to see your own kid going through something and not wanting to push too far. He’d always considered them to have a pretty solid bond, somehow strengthened after spending time together when she was his age. It makes him wonder how she ever grew up, becoming the person she is today, to be a mom. “Okay. Good. Get some rest then, and we'll talk in the morning.”

“Okay.” She lets him go, and he makes his way back to his room. Nathan’s sitting on his bed a lot more comfortably now, flipping through one of Warren’s comic books. He looks up when Warren enters. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Nathan returns.

“I talked to my mom.”

Nathan sits up a little from his spot on the bed, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he takes a seat beside Nathan. “If you’re up for it, I was thinking we could talk to her tomorrow. You know, about everything. I think she’ll be able to help.”

Nathan shuffles from beside him, bringing himself forward. “Yeah. I guess we probably should.”

Warren doesn’t want to dwell on it right now. He can tell Nathan doesn’t want to, either. They’ve been through so much today that the little energy they have left doesn’t hold enough capacity for getting into it. The past 24 hours have been non-stop, practically just *go, go, go,* since that morning which feels like a decade ago. *Three, to be precise,* he thinks.

During everything, Warren never fully had the chance to mull over Nathan’s decision to come back, too thrilled at it being a reality to care to question what it was that finally convinced him. He’d seemed so sure, so determined in a fear *slash* defeat in his commitment to stay behind.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Warren echoes what he’d said to his mom, which somehow sounds more intimate between the two of them.

“I am, too.”

Warren glances Nathan’s way, “So, what made you change your mind? About coming back, you never told me on the beach.”

“Are you serious?” Nathan looks at Warren incredulously, a humoured frown twisting his lips like Warren just said something ridiculous.

Warren doesn't say anything, raising his eyebrows in surprised response.

“I did tell you. *You.* ” It’s simply stated, yet Warren’s mind still takes a second to fully comprehend it. “It was you.”

“But–how?”

“You know, for a smartass, you’re kind’ve a dumbass sometimes,” his words are lined with humour. But then Nathan’s attention isn’t on Warren anymore, his gaze downcast to the floor. He looks so serious, a contrast to only a moment prior, like he’s figuring the answer to the question out for himself. “I don’t think I fully realized it–or, *accepted* it–until you took the time to… I don’t know…” he trails off. “Make sense of me. I guess that’s the best way to put it.”

To hear Nathan define being understood, it almost hurts to listen to. Warren supposes he understands, probably one of the few–or *only* –person to know how much Nathan has been dealing with. And to *want* to.

Then Warren's smiling slyly as something dawns on him, "So, what you're saying is that–despite you being so adamantly against the idea originally–we *are* friends now?"

Nathan momentarily stares blankly at him until his features darken and he adopts a smirk of his own. He leans in close to Warren, who brings up an arm to stop him in anticipation to playfully push him away. But Nathan catches hold of his wrist, pinning it down beside Warren on the bed. "Oh, you just want to be *friends,* I see how it is, Graham…"

Warren doesn't realize he's holding his breath until the sound of his ringtone blares between them and he almost chokes from the shock. They both jump apart, Warren taking a second to collect himself as a look of terror crosses Nathan's face.

"It's okay! It's alright–it's my phone!" Warren tries to reassure him, pulling out his phone to make it stop–peeved of its interruption–and seeing who it is that's calling him. "Oh, *shit!* It's Max!"

He'd completely forgotten about their plans to grab coffee!

"Max!" He answers, narrowly dodging the comic Nathan flings his way and avoiding the glare he receives alongside it, "I am *so* sorry, something happened–I-I'm okay, though! But I got side-tracked and–"

Max's soft voice on the other end cuts him off, "It's alright, Warren. I was actually calling because I ran into an old friend and was hoping we could reschedule."

Chloe. "Oh, yeah, of course," Warren runs a hand through his hair. "You two should definitely catch up."

"Thanks for understanding. Are you sure everything's alright?"

"Yes–yup. All good here, but we should still talk." Warren casually paces around the room a little.

"Okay, good. We'll get coffee soon, I promise. I'll talk to you later, okay?'

"Sure thing," he's about to hang up when he remembers, "oh–Max, I've been meaning to ask you, uh." He casts a glance Nathan's way, catching his eye with intent, "Well, it's kind've a favour, really. Something I was hoping you could ask your mom about…"

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Things moved pretty fast after that night. Warren remembers how that evening was the last bit of calm he and Nathan would share in the days that followed. Allowing themselves a bit of peace before what would become their lives for the next couple of months. How shortly after Warren's call with Max, he and Nathan exchanged a wordless understanding that everything was about to change. Trying their best to, for a fleeting moment, relish in their success of coming back to their present. To breathe for a second.

They'd been exhausted, but somehow it didn't stop the two from staying up into the night, reminiscent of the first night they'd shared together in Lou's dorm room. Neither of them wanting the peace they had to be over, aware of what daybreak had in store for them.

It was only after their speech started to slur and they had to fight against drooping eyelids that they allowed themselves sleep. Not before Warren put on a movie on his desktop at Nathan's insistence, who Warren knew without having to ask was to provide noise and distraction from his mind wandering while drifting off.

As promised, when the morning came Warren and Nathan sat down with Lou and told her pretty much everything. The calamity that is the storm that Mark Jefferson created. The Darkroom, who he was, what he'd do, the girls—and most difficult of all—Nathan's involvement.

As they talked, they were aware of how the situation grew more dire, Lou's reception constant though her expression growing more severe at every word they spoke.

From there Warren's father got involved, and by extension, Max's mom, who Warren had asked about since he knew she worked as a lawyer. It was hard to swallow the logistics of it all. They'd expressed how Nathan being over the age would benefit him for his independence to the Prescott name—especially if his family proved to be difficult when everything started to come out, which Warren wouldn't put past them—but that being over 18 also came with repercussions to his involvement in everything.

It was a fact that Nathan was aware of, unsurprising but also determined in his need to set things right and not shy away from the part he played in it all, too. Warren knew about the remorse he carried over it, even if he didn't flaunt it. And when Warren argued that he'd been manipulated and the fault lay solely with Jefferson—even when everyone who knew agreed—that wasn't how things often went.

And it didn't, for the most part. It was messy, but God knows how much worse it could have been in an alternative universe where Nathan didn't have the support he ended up receiving, or where he might never have been able to do anything about it. Or if Jefferson got to him first.

Shortly after was when Warren found out Nathan has a sister, Kristine, who'd halted her nomadic lifestyle to drive straight down to Arcadia Bay after receiving the news. She acted as the primary support from his family and shared Nathan's quality of stubbornness almost to a T, which came in pretty useful when dealing with their parents. Warren liked her a lot.

When he could, Nathan mostly stayed with Warren and his parents. And even when Warren had to be back at school, his free time was always consumed by Nathan.

Things weren't so black and white, even with the accumulation of pretty solid evidence Warren helped Nathan sort through, which had been one thing to hear about, but to actually see? It was tough, to say the least.

The worst of it was when they found Rachel. It didn't come as a surprise, not really, yet the news still came with a disquieted shock that impacted the whole of town. It also served as the most solidifying proof against Jefferson and the precipice of building a case against him. Nathan had spent the entirety of that day in Warren's bed, not speaking to anyone. Warren remained at his side the whole time.

When they raided the Darkroom, the true nature of Mark Jefferson was starkly brought to light. There was an uproar with his position at the school and how vulnerable it made the students there. In contrast there was disbelief from people all over the country who'd known him as the well-renowned photographer that he was. But more than anything else, Warren was relieved. Relieved that people finally knew and that he could never touch Nathan again. Because what they'd found in that underground bunker-turned-nightmare-material was enough to convict him for the rest of his life.

Hauntingly, too—and what Warren didn't find out until a while later—was a plot to get rid of Nathan and pin everything on him, all orchestrated by Jefferson as an exit-plan. It was this that got the Prescotts somewhat sympathetic to their son's plight, though him and Warren knew it was most likely because they didn't appreciate their name being dragged in the mud alongside Nathan's. Seeing as it was Prescott property Jefferson had been performing this sick hobby of his at, they had no choice but to make a statement.

Alongside the evidence supporting Nathan, Warren was among the first to testify. Followed by Victoria Chase, and Max, too. He was surprised to learn that though Chloe had no involvement with the trial and still refused to speak to Nathan for the most part, Max had admitted she understood and also blamed only Jefferson for what happened to Rachel. Her opinion mattered almost more than anybody else's to Nathan, who'd been particularly emotional when Warren relayed what Max had told him.

But though there were good days–few and far between as they may have been, the hard days felt the longest.

'The Prodigal Son Stands Trail', 'A Quiet Town Not So Quiet', 'The Fall of an Icon: What is Art Really Worth?' Headline after headline began circulating around the small town exposing Nathan and the famed and well loved artist Mark Jefferon, the shock mostly received at his involvement in all of this.

But Warren paid it no mind, willing Nathan to do the same. Until over two months had gone by spent waiting for Nathan to be cleared. And when it happens Warren feels like he is able to breathe again, having been riddled with worry over Nathan since coming back and to know it's finally over. *Finally.*

Normality wasn't really an option, but not for lack of trying. Slowly, things started to get a little easier with Nathan integrating back into a life without Jefferson. Warren will always commend Nathan for how strong he remained throughout it all, to finally make it to this

point. To be able to slowly take back a youth that he was so close to being robbed of. One Warren remains determined to be a part of.

He stretches his arms over his head as he lies in his dorm room bed, having just woken up. The weak December sunlight streams through the blinds of his window. After once again mulling over the last few months in his head, Warren's relieved to know it's mostly in the past now. The hardest part is over.

It's Saturday, the start of winter break to be precise, which is why Warren hadn't bothered to set an alarm for that morning. He cranes his next to look over at his phone that softly glows with the time. 11:21.

He stretches again, this time yawning, too, before getting out of bed to pull on a pair of jeans. He finishes getting ready quite fast, ducking out of his room to brush his teeth in the communal bathroom before returning to his dorm.

He unplugs his phone but doesn't bother texting Nathan, too impatient to wait for a response when he can just walk across the hall to knock on his door instead.

Much to Nathan's protest, Warren had convinced him to come back to Blackwell to finish his last year. Reminding him the importance of education and how there was still time to focus on improving before graduation. Warren also insisted on how it would help Nathan get some normality back in his life, the mundane and routine offering some stability after all the horror he's endured. Not to mention how Blackwell became a hell of a lot safer post-Jefferson.

He knocks on the door adjacent from his own a minute later, and when there's no response Warren tries the door anyways. It's locked, and in that instant the high-pitched *ping* of a notification sounds from his phone.

Nathan:
You up?

Warren smiles to himself, already typing out a response.

Warren:
Yeah. Where are you?

Nathan:
In the school's darkroom.

Warren blinks, because A, *yeesh, too soon* , and, B, he didn't know that the school had its own darkroom. Then he frowns, wondering where it could be since he's visited Max in the photography classroom before but never the darkroom. Seeing as she has no use for one…he has no idea where it's located–

Another *ping* sounds from his phone.

Nathan:
Through the doors of the east wing.

Room 118.

Warren:
Omw.

Warren quickly backtracks to his room, darting to put on his jacket– *Nathan's* jacket–and a pair of mitts, and making sure not to forget a small package lying on his desk which he carefully places into his backpack before slinging it across his shoulder. And then he's heading across campus to the main building, hunched inside his jacket which he wraps tightly around his frame from the biting wind.

The halls are deserted, most of the students having already left to go home to their families for the break. The few that are sticking around or who haven't left yet definitely aren't hanging out inside the main building.

He comes to a sudden halt after flying down the hallway when he spots the number 118 on one of the doors, gently pushing it open so as to not startle Nathan. Except—he enters a small pitch black room with another door across from him.

"You can come in!" He hears Nathan call just beyond it.

Complying, Warren opens the second door to reveal a larger room washed in a red glow. *Ah, right.* The strange door situation makes sense now.

He doesn't know why he's surprised, he knows what a darkroom is even if he's never stepped foot inside one before. The whole room being lit with red is certainly off putting, though. It makes Warren wonder if Jefferson's Darkroom was anything like this, his mind forcing an unwanted visual image that Warren is quick to shake away.

Nathan has his back to Warren, using some sort of tongs to pick up a photo that's submerged in the container in front of him.

Upon closer inspection, Warren comes to the realization that a bunch of these photos are hung up on a line around the station Nathan works at. He watches as Nathan clips the one he's just taken out to hang beside the others.

Warren leans in near one, gently taking hold of the corner to steady it as he makes out the image of Lou and himself at the dance. Lou's turquoise dress is blurred from the motion of them dancing, both of them smiling and lit up from the strobe lights that Warren recalls all too well from that night.

"Are these…?"

"Yeah," Nathan finally turns to him, looking a little embarrassed. For what, Warren doesn't know, since he's in absolute awe of them.

Another depicts the two of them working away with the reactor in the lab. Their faces are set in concentration, oblivious to their photo being taken. Beside that one hangs an image of Lou

and Warren in their booth at the Two Whales, Warren taking a generous sip of Lou's chocolate milkshake.

Seeing the pictures of him and his mom bring about a certain feeling that Warren can't quite express. There's an elation like no other, yet it still tightens his chest at how nostalgic it all feels, realizing how dear he already holds the memory of the time he'd spent with the two of them then.

"Nathan, these are… these are *amazing.* "

"I hadn't really had time to get around to developing them but… yeah, I'm glad you like them." He's pulling out another picture, handing it over to Warren, "here, hang this up."

Warren takes it from him, admiring the image of a blundering brown and orange dog ripping its way down the beach to chase after a stick. "Is this that dog you were telling me about!" Warren excitedly flips the picture to Nathan, some of the droplets of solution flying his way.

Nathan lets out a laugh, "Yeah, I forgot I took a photo to show you."

Warren's still beaming as he turns to hang it up. Then proceeds to help Nathan with the handful he has left. All the while he takes in each of the photos, eyes scanning every inch with quiet awe.

"That should be it," Nathan concludes as he hands Warren one last photo. "They're yours when they're all dry, should be good to take down after we come back. Speaking of which, I'm all set to head out. Just want to make a short stop at my dorm to grab some stuff."

Warren's barely able to fathom the first part of what Nathan says, rendered in shock when Nathan slips by him. "Nathan—I…"

Nathan turns back around to look at Warren, "It's the least I could do after… after everything." There's strain in his expression, not able to keep eye contact with Warren as his gaze drops to the floor. "Besides, this is as much for me as it's for you, so, it's really not that big of a deal."

Warren isn't convinced in the slightest. He thinks this is probably the nicest thing Nathan has ever done for him. That *anyone* has ever done for him. But he doesn't say anything more, opting to follow Nathan out of the darkroom and act inconspicuous when he wipes a sleeve to his eyes.

Then they're trudging back through the cold outside, eventually making it to Nathan's dorm room. Warren plops himself down on the couch as Nathan scoops up the few things he's planning to bring when they stay at Warren's house for the break. He's excited, looking forward to the opportunity to binge watch a shit ton of movies that Nathan hasn't seen and Warren can recite by heart.

He continues to watch as Nathan zips up his backpack but refrains from slinging it onto his shoulders. There's a moment of hesitation and then suddenly he's shoving something Warren hadn't realized he's holding into Warren's hands. "Merry Christmas, or *whateverthefuck."*

“Whaa–?” Looking down at the small haphazardly wrapped gift that he now cradles, Warren is rendered speechless.

“And, uhh, don’t mind all that,” Nathan idly points a finger at what Warren assumes is how he’d used newspaper for wrapping. The corners vaguely resembling that of a dog's chew toy and the tape to paper ratio past the point of Warren being able to recycle it.

“You got me something!?” He can hardly believe it, handling it carefully. He’d already been so taken aback by all the photos Nathan developed for him, he doesn’t know if he can handle this, too.

“Duh. Now fucking open it.”

Warren does as instructed, gently prying at the edges of the square shape it’s in. Once he’s shed the gift from its wrapping, he reveals a black box that looks suspiciously familiar… It dawns on Warren then, his eyes growing wide. “Nathan–no way you–”

He doesn’t even open it, instead he’s lifting it to Nathan, shaking his head.

“I can’t accept this–”

“Yes. You *can.* ” Nathan’s shoving it back towards Warren, rolling his eyes. Warren tries once more to give it back, wordlessly, but Nathan’s not having any of it. “Oh my God, just take it, *please.* ”

Finally Warren complies–half from him being impressed at Nathan knowing and using the word *‘please’* –and with some reservation lifts the cover of the box to reveal a brand-new calculator watch like the one he’d had before. It’s the exact make and model, prompting Warren to shake his head in disbelief. “How did you even…?”

“I found out from Lou. ‘*Gee, that watch Warren has sure is super neat! Where on earth can I get one of those?!’”* Nathan reenacts overdramatically with a stupid little voice, before regaining his usual demeanor and flopping down on the couch beside Warren.

Warren eyes his friend at his side, “Yeah right, she’d see right through that.” Nathan only shrugs and Warren looks back to the watch still in his hands. He takes it from the case and fastens it around his wrist, studying it there. He’s thankful of how he won’t have to make excuses to his mom about not wearing it anymore. “I–wow, dude. Thank you. Seriously.”

Nathan takes hold of Warren’s arm to take a look at it close up, too, “There, now you're a hundred percent nerd again.” He shoves Warren’s arm back at him a second later.

Chuckling slightly, Warren holds it up in front of his face again to admire when he remembers– “Oh *mannnnnn…* ” He slouches into the couch defeatedly with a groan, running his hands down his face.

“What? Did I get the wrong one or something?” Nathan looks to the watch with a furrowed expression.

“No, no. It’s not that.” Warren begrudgingly sits up, grabbing at his backpack to pull out his own gift he’d gotten–or *made* , would be a better way to phrase it–for Nathan. He hadn’t exactly been expecting Nathan to get him anything, making his present seem super lame in comparison.

He holds up the thin shaped gift, it’s pristine Christmas wrapping doing little to hide his shame.

“I got you something, too. But at this point it’s just embarrassing. I–I should really get you something else instead.”

“Too late,” Nathan plucks it out from between Warren’s fingers with a grin, tearing it apart a second later, oblivious to Warren who sinks back further into the couch in hopes of being swallowed whole with a grimace on his face.

He uncovers the sadly enclosed CD, staring at it blankly. *Yup. He hates it.* Warren presses his lips together. *What a dumb idea…*

“You made me a mixtape?” Nathan asks quietly, eyes still downcast to it.

“I know, it–it’s really dumb. Honestly I don’t know what I was thinking, you actually don’t have to keep it–”

“I love it.”

“You–wait really?”

Nathan raises his gaze to meet with Warren’s, and there’s no hint of sarcasm. No repressed smile like he’s only saying it to mess with Warren. He looks serious. A small part of Warren is even convinced he looks slightly glassy eyed.

Nathan opens his mouth to say something, then closes it, looking back down as he flips over the CD to see the list of songs that are on it. His eyes scan the list, a slight frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. The only indication of what Nathan is feeling in that moment.

“This was playing at the dance… and this is the song we were blasting in the car.”

“Yeah, they’re our songs.”

Nathan’s attention snaps to Warren at his words, “Our songs?”

“I–I hope that’s okay…”

“It is, I honestly don’t know what to say. It’s kind of like how you seemed way more impacted at the photos than getting your watch back.”

Warren blinks, “Hey, that’s not–!”

“I’m messing with you,” Nathan’s grin returns. “But it’s a little true.” He takes another moment to look to the CD in his hands. “This is… this means a lot, Warren.”

Nathan's got a point, Warren admits internally. The sentimental value the photographs Nathan took the time to take and develop capturing moments in time Warren wishes he could relive certainly impacted him more than anything else ever could. It makes him feel a lot better about gifting Nathan with something he might regard in the same way.

These songs are special moments, too. Some ones they've already shared, and others that are reserved for new memories they'll make. Songs that Warren felt inclined and open enough to be able to share with Nathan.

Warren leans in to point at the first track of the list, "I think you'll really dig this one…"

Eventually Nathan stores the CD with the rest of his belongings that he's taking. He does one last round–at Warren's prompt–to make sure he hasn't forgotten anything. And once Warren is done setting up his new watch, the two of them make one last stop at Warren's room to pick up the reactor before exiting the dormitories and heading out.

"What're you doing with that thing, anyway?" Nathan eyes the reactor in Warren's hands once they're halfway to the parking lot.

"You'll see," Warren only offers and Nathan shrugs. When they approach Nathan's truck, the two dump their stuff inside. But as Nathan goes to climb in, Warren stops him. "Hold up a sec."

Nathan turns to him expectantly. Warren's holding out the reactor to him. He glances down at it then back up at Warren. "Uh, why exactly are you giving it to me?"

"I want you to smash it."

Nathan blinks at him, hand still wrapped around the truck door handle like he's frozen.

"One last time, for good," Warren explains. "I kinda forgot about it after we got back with everything that was going on, but it's just been sitting collecting dust in my room and, honestly, I don't think it's a good idea to keep it. Including any temptation that comes with keeping it, I think it's best to get rid of it once and for all."

Nathan's slowly un-clinging himself from the truck to wrap his fingers carefully around the reactor. The movement heavy with intent, he looks between it and Warren still without saying anything.

"And, uh, I thought, what better place than where it all began?" He's then arming himself with a lopsided grin, "There's some kind of symbolism here, I can feel it…" he jokes.

But Nathan isn't laughing, his eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

Warren nods, which coaxes Nathan to take a step forward with it still raised in his hands, handling it so delicately for something that's about to be broken to pieces–something that Nathan had at one point thrown to the ground in rage without hesitation what feels like a lifetime ago.

They walk to the middle of the parking lot, Nathan casting Warren with another look of confliction, “Did you end up handing it in as your thesis project?”

Warren waves a hand, “Nah, I submitted an old miniature wind turbine I’d made for fun a while back. My mom helped me improve it a bit,” He smiles at Nathan, “got an A.”

Nathan looks down again at the reactor which he holds at arms length. “Listen,” Warren starts again, “there’s no point in keeping it. Every time I remember I still have it it feels like I’m just holding onto a ticking time bomb, as much as I think a certain part of me will always regard it with some sort of fondness, I’m also slightly terrified of it and it’s too dangerous to keep.”

“Yeah. No, you’re right.”

His trepidation lingers still, evident from his distant expression. And Warren can’t say he’s surprised. It had been Nathan, after all, who’d been so tempted to stay in the past. Even if he’d been too busy to dwell upon the reactor for quite some time since being back, he’d likely kept it subconsciously locked away in the back of his mind as an escape route if things got bad.

Maybe not entirely, Warren isn’t sure. But it goes without saying that it’s hard to let go of it after everything. After what it’s turned into for them.

And yet the time has finally come to let go. Not just to the reactor, but to everything that’s come to pass.

Nathan seems to come to the same realization, his face contorting with newfound determination. “You’re right,” he repeats.

They pass a look of like mindedness between them, Warren offering Nathan a smile of encouragement. Then he’s raising the reactor above his head, ready to bring it down to smash on the ground.

“Nice knowing ya, *bitch.”*

The sound of it breaking apart on impact brings Warren back to the first time he’d witnessed Nathan doing the same thing. But as a contrast, it does not bring about the same devastation it had then. Instead, it brings relief, as if all that pent up worry and anxiousness can finally seep out of him. It’s freeing. He can’t even imagine how amplified Nathan must feel in this aspect.

Once the moment’s passed, Warren stoops to pick up the pieces, this time Nathan joining him. They pile it into the back of Nathan’s truck before climbing into the front. Warren still clings onto the cathartic relief that flows through him, not realizing right away how Nathan’s put the keys into the ignition but doesn’t turn the engine on, hand lingering there.

“It’s nothing,” Nathan says before Warren can ask him anything, the question of concern dying on his tongue. “That’s not entirely true.” Nathan slowly sits back against the seat, dropping his hands. “It’s just, I don’t know. I still don’t really know what I’m doing… And

just because of everything that's happened with–you know. That doesn't suddenly make me a good person."

He pauses. And Warren can see how his mind goes, eyes not really focusing on anything beyond the windshield in front of them. The truth and severity of his confession obvious in his expression, lined with shame, too. Shame that had never been so apparent and so deeply rooted since first confessing to all that he's done the night of the dance.

"It was like I was back there, you know. That night, when we only had a minute to spare and I was trying to get back to the car. The rain, the flashes of lightning, my father. It was all so disorienting, like the night Jefferson brought me to where he killed Rachel. It was just the same. The blackness that we were plunged into, how I can still only really recall it in flashes." Nathan blinks slowly at the recollection, his face falling as he whispers the next part out, "I was so scared. Scared of being back, scared of not making it. Scared of not seeing you again.

I think, unknowingly right at that moment, I decided that was the first thing I would talk about in my statement. How I would try and point out the location of where I think he might've buried her. The best my memory could allow given how fucked up I was."

Warren can recall it perfectly. The scene of Nathan at the police station sitting behind a closed door with a small window. The patterned wires crisscrossing inside the glass that Warren peers into from his seat in the hallway, watching intently as Nathan inaudibly recounts everything. Max's mom at his side as his lawyer. His head hung at certain parts or his gaze fixed at others to the officer in front of him who takes notes all the while.

He's not sure if he blinked at all for its entirety, only aware of his mom's presence at his side. Waiting as an hour and then two pass before Nathan's finished, Warren anticipating the beginning of the storm.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is," Nathan continues, "I'm glad of the changes–the help–everything you've done for me—but I'm not expecting it. I'm not expecting you to–"

"Hey," Warren cuts him off, angling himself so his body is fully turned to Nathan. "I'm in it. I'm *with you*. There's no changing that."

Nathan's eyes finally meet Warren's, open and vulnerable in a way that Warren knows he only allows himself to be in his company. And he hopes that it's enough, that Nathan understands Warren's here. For *all* of it. The fun and easy parts, sure, but most importantly the hard parts. Because *God* knows how hard it's been already, and Warren isn't going anywhere.

It doesn't mean to say it hasn't been a lot–or even scary at times–though he knows it's been that and 10 times worse for Nathan. He'll never be alone in that again.

And he knows Nathan isn't perfect. Who the fuck is? But Warren's never witnessed growth from someone as much as he has from Nathan. If he could bump into the original version of Nathan the day they got transported back in time, Warren would be met with a stranger. The thought could almost make him cry.

Maybe things aren't black and white, Warren thinks he only really got to understand Nathan after things became more of a mixture. And Warren's not stupid, he knows that since the trial happened things aren't magically 'fixed' with everything all tied together with a perfect fucking bow–as he imagines Nathan might put it. Even with Jefferson's involvement made public, it doesn't take away the hurt and pain and everything else caused that is difficult to accept simply because there is someone to place the blame on and have them suffer the wrath and consequences.

And Warren knows how Nathan still blames himself for so much of it. Still viewing himself as the 'link'. And though he's come a long way from the person he was during those long months that seem so distant now, it was still him. *'It was still me, Warren.'*

Warren's proud of how far he's come since then, receptive of the help he's receiving now that he finally has some sort of grasp on his life. Far from the kid who spiralled in silence, not knowing what was happening and too caught up in his own fear and anger to even *know* what to do about it.

A contrast to the Nathan who was so lost in reality that being sent into the past barely phased him at all, a fact that Warren can almost look back on with laughter. *Almost* . Maybe not quite yet.

But one day they will. One day when they've moved past this and Nathan isn't waking up in a cold sweat anymore, or when people don't associate him with a headline any longer. One day in the future when they won't even know it, when a mundane lifestyle sneaks up on them without realization. One day they'll be okay.

Warren can imagine it now, and though he and Nathan likely won't be aware of it then, he's already thankful of it. Sometime years from now, as they sit in the car just as they do now, listening to their mixtape. The breeze in their hair and an arm each draped out of the window, laughing and singing along to the same song. A version of themselves distant from who they are now, but together. Still together.

Because Warren hopes to *God* that Nathan knows that Warren's here for him. That he never has to feel like the whole world is against him. As long as Warren's still in it, that will never be the case. He's in his corner.

And even as they're about to take their departure home for the break, Warren hopes that Nathan's come to regard it in the same way by now. Warren's home, but *Nathan's* too.

"I'm not going anywhere." Warren states in finite determination.

He watches as Nathan's expression shifts, similar to that day on the beach when Warren solidified his belief in Nathan when he'd promised to stop Jefferson. Hardset and with an unbreaking gaze, his eyes the only thing conveying his relief. It's Nathan's way of accepting what Warren says.

"And you'll be okay."

“I’ll be okay?” Nathan’s face already slips back to that scrutiny. “Yeah, thanks nerd I know I’m gunna be fine. *You’ll* be okay.” But his judgment–the defensiveness–is not harsh, softening slightly as the corners of his lips twist up into a smile.

And Warren returns it, laughing a little, “ *We’ll* be okay.”

“Sure. Whatever,” Nathan responds after an exaggerated eye roll. He’s not one to linger on sentimentality, after all. But his smile does linger, and after a beat he adds lowly—with no hint of aggression, “I know.”

It’s probably the most satisfying response Warren’s received from him yet. And with that, Warren buckles himself in as Nathan produces the mixtape in his hand, inserting the CD into his truck console.

There’s a short pause as the CD loads the first track of his mixtape. Nathan rolls out onto the road, turning up the electronic sound that starts from A Flock of Seagulls’ *Wishing (If I Had a Photograph of You)*. It fills the air with its optimistic tune and carries a lightness with it that Warren can appreciate in that moment. *They’re okay.* He believes this, thinking to a version of themselves in the future who can promise this. *They’ll be okay.*

Chapter End Notes

ANDDDDDD roll end credits — FADE OUT — ‘Now I’m In It’ by HAIM starts to play (this is the song I imagine plays at the end if it were a movie). I mean I know it technically ends already with a song but, uh, disregard that. Or don’t. Imagine whatever song you want.

GUYS. MY FRIENDS. IT’S OVER. I might cry…

I always knew how the fic was going to end but it kind of ran away from me and become a little overwhelming at parts to know where exactly I was going with it and how I was going to properly wrap it up (I can NOT believe it's been a year since I started this). I don’t know if I’m 100% satisfied with this last chapter, but I hope you guys still enjoyed it! (who knows, I might spontaneously come back and change it at some point after agonizing over it lololol)

Thank you so much for reading this, I have truly never been so invested in writing something nor felt such a kinship with ya’ll as I was writing it. I really really really mean it when I say I’m so sad it’s over.

But the journey was amazing. Thank you all for your comments, kudos, and support!!!!!

- Silhouettes

edit: I forgot to name the chapter fml THE LAST/MOST IMPORTANT CHAPTER!!!!! anyways, I fixed it now hah.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!